

Social Media and Political Communication

Jeremy Harris Lipschultz



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This book offers a wide-scale, interdisciplinary analysis and guide to social media and political communication, examining the political use of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok.

From disinformation to artificial intelligence, Jeremy Lipschultz explores how social media tools are being deployed by “good” and “bad” political actors. The use of “fake news” or disinformation is clearly contextualized for readers within a wider understanding of the historic uses of propaganda, persuasion and political advertising. Lipschultz also examines how social media is used by activists and social movements to increase civic engagement and amplify social issues. The book surveys traditional media communication theories and methods, exploring newsgatekeeping, propaganda, persuasion and personal influence, and diffusion of new technologies and ideas, teaching vital critical thinking methods for consuming, engaging with, and understanding political social media content from a media literacy perspective. It also includes social network analyses which offer visual representations of social media crowds that influence social movements and political change.

Essential reading for students of Media and Cultural Studies, Communication, Journalism, Political Science, and Information Technology, as well as anyone wishing to understand the current intersection of social media and politics.

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Jeremy Harris Lipschultz

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Preface

From disinformation to **artificial intelligence (AI)**, social media tools are being deployed by “good” and “bad” political actors. Newsfeed algorithms that attract us to sites also may be exploited into consuming large amounts of potentially harmful information. This book traces the historic uses of propaganda, persuasion and political **advertising**. It then turns to Internet studies in the 1990s (“Web 1”), the introduction of social media sites, such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and TikTok (“Web 2”), and “Web 3.” *Social Media & Political Communication* focuses on media communication theory and practices related to political communication and public opinion. At a time when Meta boasts more than 4 billion Facebook users and about \$10 billion in advertising profits, government officials are proposing regulatory limits to the power of social networks. Among the disparate concerns of media communication and public opinion, theories can be applied to the study of social media communication:

- Diffusion of new political uses and gratification
- **Citizen journalism** and public opinion
- Source and message credibility
- Social capital within networks
- Micro-targeting reinforcement messages
- Geotagging and data privacy
- Crowdfunding campaigns
- Legal and ethical concerns

- Intellectual property and memes
- Trust and **transparency**
- Social influence, celebrities and empowerment

Theories and methods will be explored and applied to understand political uses of TikTok and other newer mobile apps. Political campaigns and office holders, such as former President Donald Trump, have benefited from dominance of social media channels, such as Twitter, and its popular **live tweeting**. Free **Twitter Analytics** and TweetDeck post management made it relatively easy for political figures to quickly grow audiences.

At the same time, we can measure increased political polarization within Twitter and other channels. This social media use does not appear to serve the interests of an informed and participatory democracy. On a global scale, political leaders struggle to address issues, encourage self-regulation and social responsibility and pass effective laws and regulation. Meanwhile, blockchain technologies promise a future of verified information security.

The objective of the book is to educate students and the public about the inner-workings of the political processes and the effects across popular social media channels. The book will compare and contrast social science theories and research, critical and cultural theories, normative theories and media literacy approaches.

Traditional media theory textbooks lag social media communication innovation, as explored in my three previous textbooks in this series: *Social Media Law and Ethics* (2022); *Social Media Communication*, third edition (2021); and *Social Media Measurement & Management* (2020). The book applies popular media theories and research: social marketing eWOM; knowledge gaps; **agenda-setting** and building; spiral of silence; media dependency; cultivation; computer-mediated communication; digital literacy and others.

Social Media and Political Communication (2023) applies popular media theories and research data to social media communication issues impacting **engaged journalism**, broadcasting, **public relations (PR)**, advertising and marketing. The use of so-called “**fake news**” or disinformation will be contextualized within an understanding about persuasion, manipulation and propaganda. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) core issues of identity presentation, interaction/**engagement** and online communities will be related to media literacy problems and solutions. Media and political communication research strike to the core of democracy within a social media age in which tweets sometimes dominate policies. The book teaches critical thinking methods for consuming social media

content, engaging with it and learning during and between elections. U.S. and global approaches are considered with respect to data privacy regulation.

As an undergraduate decades ago, I began to study political science and connect it to communication and media theory. At that time, few political scientists gave much attention to journalism and media. Later, as a working journalist, I began to see how communication theory and methods helped explain events. My early scholarly work at Southern Illinois University on source and news reporter relationships offered data about the importance of shared values and symbiotic relationships. My professors at SIU, the late L. Erwin Atwood and Robert Spellman, Dennis Davis, Walter Jaehnig and others helped form a mass communicator framework that runs through my nearly four decades of published works. While it was difficult to predict the massive digital media shift that happened between 1980 and now, our concepts and theories about personal influence, social networks and communities survived the test of time. Meanwhile, the Web 3 road ahead with its blockchain networks, cryptocurrencies, wallets and NFT tokens offer a new disruptive path to the future for social media and political communication.

Jeremy Harris Lipschultz
January 3, 2022

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Introduction to Global Political and Social Media Communication

“Then came Trump, using Twitter to blast his thoughts straight at tens of millions of followers. The ease of social media allowed him not only to speak to millions unfiltered by the news media but to both undermine the press and drive their daily news agenda all at the same time”

Steve Thomma, White House Correspondents’ Association (2021, p. 113)

Fragmented and noisy social media communication channels reflect a context that is disruptive to traditional democracy. The massive size of social networks, such as Facebook (about 2.9 billion monthly users), shifted billions of dollars to the platforms through advertising to users, and money also flowed through social influence marketing. About \$4 billion were predicted to be paid to “influencers or their representatives to promote products and services primarily on social media and other platforms featuring user-generated content” (eMarketer, 2021, para. 2). As Facebook profits were more than \$10 billion, CEO Mark Zuckerberg imagined an even larger “metaverse” bolstered by **augmented reality** (AR), **virtual reality** (VR) and other immersive entertainment technologies that consume and dominate humans’ time and attention (Ortutay, 2021, para. 2). The so-called

metaverse had its roots in early cyberspace **buzz**, and there are numerous persistent questions:

So is the metaverse the next big advance that will revolutionize the way we all connect with each other? Is it just a repackaging of existing technologies into a new catch-all concept? Or is it just the latest buzzword marketing term?

(Orland, 2021, para. 6)

Metaverse appears to be a metaphor for Facebook's vague strategic direction that may include "shared social space with avatars," "a virtual world," "virtual property" and three-dimensional spaces that take advantage of augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality new technologies (Orland, 2021, paras 11–22). However, the Meta desire to license user content, such as Instagram photographs, pits the company vision against a rapidly emerging world of non-fungible tokens (NFTs) that may be monetized by content owners:

At a very high level, most NFTs are part of the Ethereum blockchain. Ethereum is a cryptocurrency, like bitcoin or dogecoin, but its blockchain also supports these NFTs, which store extra information that makes them work differently from, say, an ETH coin. It is worth noting that other blockchains can implement their own versions of NFTs.

(Clark, 2021, para. 7)

For example, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey (@jack) sold his first "just setting up my twttr" March, 2006 tweet as a Valuable digital asset saved to a wallet for about \$3 million (Peters, 2021). Content creators, such as artists and musicians, are rightly excited about the opportunity to earn money from their works, but the emerging global digital economy disrupts traditional national and international economics. Blockchain NFT within six years began to be called "Web 3" after a limited number of 10,000 CryptoPunks character images created in 2017 become valuable collectables – some worth millions of dollars when traded (CryptoPunks, 2021):

...they are decentralized, built upon a system known as the blockchain, which already undergirds Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies. Imagine it as a kind of bookkeeping where many computers at once host data that's searchable by anyone. It's operated by users collectively, rather than a corporation. People are given "tokens" for participating. The tokens can be used to vote on decisions, and even accrue real value.

(Allyn, 2021, para. 8)

At the time of writing, it was not clear whether Web 3 amounted to bubble hype, or the next wave of digital disruption that could displace social media communication or alter global politics. At issue is whether or not decentralization, which has been used by white supremacists and other bad actors, will be activated to serve democracies and freedom. Clearly, blockchain is seen as a response to centralized social media platform powers that offers a promise of secure and verifiable data and information.

Facebook had lost public trust in a series of missteps beginning with the Cambridge Analytica **big data** breach. By the 2020 U.S. presidential election and the pandemic, the Facebook newsfeed was regulated by the company. However, controls were lifted that allowed the spread of **posts** claiming that the coronavirus vaccines were dangerous ineffective (Klepper & Seitz, 2021). As vaccines began to be deployed in March of 2021, internal documents revealed that Facebook employees debated what to do, and the company was slow to respond:

By altering how posts about vaccines are ranked in people's newsfeeds, researchers at the company realized they could curtail the misleading information individuals saw about COVID-19 vaccines and offer users posts from legitimate sources like the World Health Organization...

Instead, Facebook shelved some suggestions from the study. Other changes weren't made until April... When another Facebook researcher suggested disabling comments on vaccine posts in March until the platform could do a better job of tackling anti-vaccine messages lurking in them, that proposal was ignored.

(Klepper & Seitz, 2021, paras 2, 5)

The anti-vaccine posts were shared at an alarming rate at a time when about ten percent in the U.S. had taken a shot and about one-third of the population considered not taking the COVID vaccine. Aaron Rodgers, a star NFL quarterback, defended himself for not vaccinating and asked the public for a "healthy debate" before cancelling him (Parler, 2020, para. 4), but Facebook and other social media companies did not escape blame.

The so-called "Facebook Papers" first revealed by a former company manager showed that artificial intelligence (AI) and natural language processing algorithms were difficult for humans to control in balancing profits and public safety. Facebook and other social media sites earn revenue by selling advertising to users glued to the newsfeed. The **cost per click** is relatively cheap to attract large numbers of viewers. Even when Facebook posts were accurate, a majority of comments made during the vaccine rollout appeared to be negative. One proposal in Congress has

called for Facebook to give users the option of turning off the **algorithm**. The digital business model frequently leads to secrecy and lack of transparency for investors and the public. Even page owners' **Facebook Insights** data are more limited than valuable company data. Our collective attention is for sale on social media and other online software programs.

Apps, such as Pokémon Go, encourage players within gaming environments to use their mobile phones to locate and blend geography through a **location-based services (LBS)**, objects, branded content and creative imagery. Increasingly, advertising and user content, promotional campaigns that include free products or trips and other consumer marketing will have social and political impact. This helps explain why there is increasing international pressure to impose government antitrust and privacy regulation.

The **convergence** of media platforms in recent decades and decline of mainstream news media **gatekeeping** offered a paradox. Social construction of news for decades has been influenced by public relations and political manipulation, but digital channels offered anyone with an Internet connection the opportunity to reach large audiences with their opinions. Media messages are an important input to individual attitude formation. Media and **user-generated content** may trigger changes over time in individual and group behavior. Screen time spent on mobile apps competes with family, friend, peer, colleague and other interpersonal face-to-face relationships that help form behavioral habits, such as voting.

While new sources of influence emerged, existing powerful people quickly learned to master Twitter and other channels' **user profiles** in an effort to maintain and expand political, economic, social and cultural control over expanding social media audiences. Thomma (2021), a former Washington, D.C. newspaper reporter, reminded readers that Donald Trump repeatedly used Twitter to broadcast official White House policy before he lost reelection in 2020, gathered supporters before the January 6, 2021 Capitol siege and eventually was banned for life by Twitter. It is not simply about political power, but also economic impact. Billionaire Richard Branson repeatedly tweeted ahead of his Virgin Galactic trip into space that was scheduled ahead of rivals Jeff Bezos and Twitter stakeholder Elon Musk (Montoya Bryan & Dunn, 2021). Within a sea of opinion, promotion, influence, propaganda and distortion, journalists struggle to balance personal **branding** against news organization standards for objectivity (Alsop, 2021a). Failure to comply with traditional business standards frequently results in a firing and even "canceling" on social media and other channels responding to **cancel culture** pressures (Alsop, 2021a, para. 2). The separation between facts and opinions ultimately requires an engaged audience able to use media literacy skills.

Propaganda has its historic roots within war efforts a century ago:

Early 20th-century German officials fretted about the advantage that democratic media systems enjoyed in promoting war, particularly because talented, responsive, and trusted journalists could engage with populations in ways that were not possible in authoritarian regimes.

(Oats, 2021, p. 331)

One-hundred years later, trust – as well as freedom and patriotism – can be found across social media communication channels. Even during a global pandemic, governments use narrative communication, but so does “one faction in the United States against another” (Oats, 2021, p. 334). Propaganda effectiveness is limited by how the public filters and interprets information. While some is shared across social media channels, competing messages are offered by those influencing public opinion at any given moment. For example, Russia’s Ukraine invasion included wartime propaganda and censorship with varied effectiveness over time.

The proliferation of online Internet opinion came to drown journalistic facts. The opportunities to reach global audiences with fresh ideas are both a call for healthy social and cultural change at the same time that representative governments are challenged to upend the status quo. New media technologies, such as **social networks**, may polarize online “tribes” rather than promote **pluralism** and equality. Legitimate demands for racial and gender political reforms empower groups that have been oppressed, and threaten those with privilege. Diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) movements have grown within corporate and organizational cultures, fueled by “violence perpetrated against Black and Asian & Pacific Islander communities” (Goldsmith, 2021, para. 3). Inclusion of diverse groups within the business communities is suggested to bring value through a return on investment (**ROI**):

The true ROI of DE&I comes when everyone can deliver their best performance at your organization, knowing they are welcomed for the value they bring as a unique individual built from the richness of experiences they bring from their background.

(Goldsmith, 2021, para. 14)

Inclusion, though, may be contrasted with division and polarization of political parties, candidates and social crowds that may not support progressive economic change that threatens existing power and scarce resources. Many welcome the weakening of elite pluralism as an opportunity to reconstruct norms, and this

book examines competing political forces that either bring us together into a new sense of **community** or pull us apart as polarized political crowds that fight over tribal-like turf. Still, it took Twitter about 15 years to respond to the need for a return to some level of news gatekeeping on its site. The site struck a deal with Reuters and the Associated Press “to help elevate accurate information,” “ensure that credible information is available in real time,” and “provide context on topics garnering widespread interest” (Associated Press, 2021, paras 1–3). The Twitter response to its misinformation, malinformation and disinformation problem was to try to get ahead of it: “Rather than waiting until something goes viral, Twitter will contextualize developing discourse at pace with or in anticipation of the public conversation” (Associated Press, 2021, para. 4). While news organizations now help Facebook do fact-checking and **prebunking** to neutralize lies, the speed of Twitter requires a need to emphasize accuracy of information and warn users of spreading falsehoods.

History teaches us that social and technological change are difficult. Nineteenth-century **yellow journalism**, for example, is a reminder that so-called “fake news” is not new. Early newspapers and later mass media sometimes utilized sensationalism in their storytelling to sell newspapers, attract newscast audiences, and build media habits through “references to realism” (Connery, 2011, p. 6). With every new media – movies, radio, television, cable and the Internet – social critics have been alarmed by the potential to harm children and disrupt the functions within society through “modeling” or “observational learning” (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989, p. 212). Academic researchers explore media processes, direct and indirect effects from content and larger social, cultural, political and economic issues: “When new media do become firmly established communications systems, the older mass media will face their own adaptation problems” (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach, 1989, p. 350). At the same time, global media industries apply **data science** to maximize audience size, revenues and profits for shareholders: “The issue of participants in cyberspace and their impact on global communication awaits further exploration and clarification” (Wu, 2021, p. 35). Inside government, there is a tension between forces with a belief in the libertarian marketplace and those seeking regulation to offer consumer protection and limit concentration of corporate power. Social media content may be manipulated through public relations, advertising and **marketing** techniques that range from gentle persuasion to manipulative propaganda (Lipschultz, 2021). Consumer behaviors are somewhat predictable, and social networks provide a space to reach large segments of the population through humorous **memes**, creative video, dramatic images and sticky hashtags or other social media content – as well as strategic tools that are used to manage and analyze data (Quesenberry, 2021).

At the time of writing, it is unclear whether or not an unregulated social media communication **marketplace of ideas** can be ethically managed by social media platforms with the power to cancel even a U.S. president (Smith, 2021). After Donald Trump lost his 88 million Twitter followers in a lifetime ban for repeatedly violating site rules, he lost a substantial amount of political power: “Cast into the social media wilderness, the former US president releases statements by email these days, clogging the inboxes of reporters whose attention has turned elsewhere,” *The Guardian* wrote. “The era when a single tweet from Trump could electrify cable news, rattle financial markets and unnerve foreign capitals is long gone” (Smith, 2021, para. 3). Twitter and other platforms have expressed a social obligation to respond to **confirmation bias** on their sites, such as found within **QAnon** conspiracy rhetoric. Conspiracy theories are one political tactic used within **radicalization** of followers.

Box 1.1: Twitter Suspension of Donald Trump

Company: Permanent suspension of @realDonaldTrump

By Twitter Inc., Friday, 8 January 2021

After close review of recent Tweets from the @realDonaldTrump account and the context around them – specifically how they are being received and interpreted on and off Twitter – we have permanently suspended the account due to the risk of further incitement of violence.

In the context of horrific events this week, we made it clear on Wednesday that additional violations of the Twitter Rules would potentially result in this very course of action. Our public interest framework exists to enable the public to hear from elected officials and world leaders directly. It is built on a principle that the people have a right to hold power to account in the open.

However, we made it clear going back years that these accounts are not above our rules entirely and cannot use Twitter to incite violence, among other things. We will continue to be transparent around our policies and their enforcement.

Below is a comprehensive analysis of our policy enforcement approach in this case (Twitter, 2021, January 8).

Overview

On January 8, 2021, President Donald J. Trump Tweeted:

The 75,000,000 great American Patriots who voted for me, AMERICA FIRST, and MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN, will have a GIANT VOICE long into the future. They will not be disrespected or treated unfairly in any way, shape or form!!!

Shortly thereafter, the President Tweeted:

To all of those who have asked, I will not be going to the Inauguration on January 20th.

Due to the ongoing tensions in the United States, and an uptick in the global conversation in regards to the people who violently stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021, these two Tweets must be read in the context of broader events in the country and the ways in which the President's statements can be mobilized by different audiences, including to incite violence, as well as in the context of the pattern of behavior from this account in recent weeks. After assessing the language in these Tweets against our Glorification of Violence policy, we have determined that these Tweets are in violation of the Glorification of Violence Policy and the user @realDonaldTrump should be immediately permanently suspended from the service.

Assessment

We assessed the two Tweets referenced above under our Glorification of Violence policy, which aims to prevent the glorification of violence that could inspire others to replicate violent acts and determined that they were highly likely to encourage and inspire people to replicate the criminal acts that took place at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021.

This determination is based on a number of factors, including:

- President Trump's statement that he will not be attending the Inauguration is being received by a number of his supporters as

further confirmation that the election was not legitimate and is seen as him disavowing his previous claim made via two Tweets (1, 2) by his Deputy Chief of Staff, Dan Scavino, that there would be an “orderly transition” on January 20th.

- The second Tweet may also serve as encouragement to those potentially considering violent acts that the Inauguration would be a “safe” target, as he will not be attending.
- The use of the words “American Patriots” to describe some of his supporters is also being interpreted as support for those committing violent acts at the US Capitol.
- The mention of his supporters having a “GIANT VOICE long into the future” and that “They will not be disrespected or treated unfairly in any way, shape or form!!!” is being interpreted as further indication that President Trump does not plan to facilitate an “orderly transition” and instead that he plans to continue to support, empower, and shield those who believe he won the election.
- Plans for future armed protests have already begun proliferating on and off-Twitter, including a proposed secondary attack on the US Capitol and state capitol buildings on January 17, 2021.

As such, our determination is that the two Tweets above are likely to inspire others to replicate the violent acts that took place on January 6, 2021, and that there are multiple indicators that they are being received and understood as encouragement to do so.

(Twitter, 2021, January 8)

In the case of the application of Twitter’s Glorification of Violence policy, the decision left a sitting president without the power to stop a social media company from silencing him. A decline in socially responsible political communication appears to have created a sense of chaos within the spread of personal and social influence across social networks. Some of Trump’s 88 million followers were forced to go elsewhere on the Internet in search of his message. None of the alternative modes of communication packed the power of a single Trump tweet. News media, that had previously amplified his messages, gradually lost interest.

POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND ACTIVISM

During the first decade of the Internet (Web 1), it was clear to many scholars that the rules were shifting. While it remained the case that many journalists and political actors shared a symbiotic relationship, for example, online content emerged as an “alternative” path and “new resource” for access to the audience (Graber, McQuail & Norris, 1998, p. 9). While “many public policies can and do emerge without any media or public scrutiny,” the “mutual interdependence” did not make obvious that social media communication (Web 2) might create a “tower of Babel” (Graber, McQuail & Norris, 1998, pp. 9–10). In part, the shift from public voice through political polls toward direct social engagement created chaos, ambiguity and noise. A focus on new technologies at the turn of the century predicted “narrowcasting,” “digital convergence” and “active... information-seeking” (Graber, McQuail & Norris, 1998, pp. 238–242): “Because the Internet blurs the distinction between an interpersonal and broadcast network, it blurs the distinction between private and public speech” (Graber, McQuail & Norris, 1998, p. 247). This characteristic is at the heart of social media – particularly when we contrast branded and anonymous speakers. Political communication was opened by social media to reduce professional norms of journalism, create complex new roles and challenge trust of information. Political candidates turned to Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. TikTok and other sites, just as Barack Obama’s successful 2008 presidential campaign was one of the first to use apps for direct persuasion and manipulation of voters and others in the audience. Perhaps more importantly, the rise of social movements and activism, such as #BlackLivesMatter, offered political actors fresh and daily opportunities to engage on the news and issues.

Box 1.2: Social Movements and Social Media Relations

The NAACP (NAACP) has long been a voice for racial and **social justice**, but the organization needed to adjust its public relations (PR) strategies, goals and tactics to an age of social media communication. NAACP Vice President of Digital Marketing and Communications Vanessa Mbonu told Sprout Social that there were “twin pandemics” – “COVID19 and Jim Crow-era racism” (Cover, 2021, para. 5). Black Lives Matter protests

had been sparked by the deaths of black men and women at the hands of local police across the United States:

This increased the need for trusted voices more than ever. It was so important that the Black community had an organization and leaders to turn to for trusted, credible information. We saw ourselves as the providers of such information. (Cover, 2021, para. 10)

A shift from traditional news release and journalist pitch PR was strengthened by social media content strategies and engagement. “With social media relations, we can make our statements faster, bolder, louder” (Cover, 2021, para. 17). For example, the NAACP responded by retweeting a RawStory.com tweet that reported then Vice President Mike Pence’s comparison of Donald Trump to Martin Luther King, Jr.



FIGURE 1.1 NAACP Tweet (2019)

The tweet generated more than 1,300 comments, as well as thousands of **retweets** and likes. The organization has built a following of more than 650,000 on Twitter. On the site, the NAACP is free to be more direct with its audience:

Our social media relations tone and voice are very different than what we use in a traditional press release. It's assertive, it gets straight to the point, and that's what people want to see on social. Everyone's eyes glance over the "hitherto's" and "therefore's." There's not enough time or characters for that.

(Cover, 2021, para. 18)

Interaction with audience members, perhaps, feeds a more emotional tone. NAACP President Derrick Johnson (@DerrickNAACP) uses his account with more than 30,000 followers to speak out. Immediately following the 2021 conviction in the Minneapolis trial of Derek Chauvin for the death of George Floyd, he tweeted that "no amount of justice will bring Gianna's father back," and "We will not rest until all in our community have the right to breathe" #DerekChauvinTrial. The tweet was retweeted and quoted 532 times and liked by more than 2,400 accounts. Importantly, the NAACP tweets are quoted by news media and spread to an even wider audience.

The NAACP's largest platform was Instagram with 1.8 million followers, and the civil rights organization also had used Facebook and YouTube to help spread its message. The broad engagement strategy was designed to encourage followers to click on NAACP posts as a main source to its followers for opinion leadership on racial justice issues.

The African American community was "disproportionally affected" by the pandemic (Biswas, Sipes, & Brost, 2021, p. 398). The infection rate was triple that of cases among White Americans. For Black news sites, the research found that they "published a significantly higher number of stories with African Americans than mainstream news sites," and "[c]onsequence news frames included content such as higher number of deaths and infections among African Americans" (Biswas, Sipes, & Brost, 2021, pp. 409–410). There may be a link between specialized news content sites and racial differences of opinion about the pandemic and vaccine effectiveness or side effects.

The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was used along with many others, such as #GeorgeFloyd and #Ferguson, as media communication and mass-personal communication reflected a shift away from the traditional news gatekeeping model (French & Bazarova, 2017; Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). Social media communication tools empower users to expose injustice through mobile video, audio, images and text that are of great interest to journalists interested in engaging with the public through narrative storytelling (Briggs, 2020; DeAngelo & Yeghyan, 2019; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). As identified within early research, social construction of reality through content creation and distribution can be a powerful political weapon. Manipulation of public opinion through short and entertaining videos, memes and even deepfakes by political or economic trolls that change the facts of what was said or seen may promote polarized political debate, spread of misinformation or disinformation about health, and have lasting psychological effects (Pell & Wang, 2019; Köver & Reuter, 2019). In the case of TikTok videos, the spread of social media content may raise awareness of important developments, or take advantage of habitual algorithm-driven viewing (Meisenzahl, 2020; Brennan, 2020).

The intensity of immediate events, such as the death of George Floyd, subsides over time and is replaced by new examples of racial injustice. Shared common meanings through media framing either reinforce or alter the perception of policing that could promote the need for reform. The general newsgathering model that Graber (2006) first outlined, informs what we can adapt to fit SMC events through real-time visual scenes, searches for possible causes of events and cues that attempt to contextualize events within larger social, cultural and political meaning-making.

Early in an event, audience members want to know what happened. This transitions to a search for why the event happened. Eventually, blame-placing must happen within a broader social and cultural context by linking it to previous events. In the case of the #BlackLivesMatter social movement, dozens of well-known cases of deaths at the hands of police may be references. Police department spokespersons and public information officers (PIO) exercise more power to frame a narrative at the earliest stage of a new event, and may explain away an event as “under investigation,” and are quick to try to return to *normalcy*. Activists on Twitter and elsewhere, however, ignite deeper questions, demand justice and critique rapid action. Alternative media framing helps raise new questions. Whitehurst and Bynum (2021) reported the killing of Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia (#Arbery) that received national attention. An “Arm up” comment within a neighborhood Facebook group reflected increasing racial tension:

...in the year before Arbery's death, the posts in the Facebook group for the subdivision where McMichael lived portray a neighborhood increasingly on edge

over low-level incidents, with residents swapping suspicions, keeping children inside and becoming willing to take matters into their own hands.

(Whitehurst and Bynum, 2021, paras 2–3)

It appears that, “such online neighborhood forums in the U.S. have a troubling tendency to veer from wholesome community chitchat to anxious hypervigilance when suspicion is the discussion topic” (Whitehurst & Burnum, 2021, para. 4). NextDoor and other neighborhood apps offer a channel that can either bring a community together or divide them. If neighborhood-level racial anxiety is stoked by online expression of fears about crime, then social media communication may, in some cases, cultivate long-term priming of attitudes and behaviors that escalate potential for violence. If racism exists within a community, then isolated social media posts may reinforce and amplify a tendency toward hate and violent responses.

When Kyle Rittenhouse, an Illinois teenager, was found not guilty by self-defense in the Kenosha, Wisconsin shooting of three amid racial protests, news media framed the verdict around a “defining image” after he “sobbed and became physically unsteady” (Alsop, 2021b, para. 1). The television **breaking news** practice of emphasizing dramatic emotion culminated with Rittenhouse’s statement that, “Self-defense is not illegal” (Alsop, 2021b, para. 1). Live television coverage, including courtroom drama, is seen by some as potentially triggering future vigilantes, at the same time that “it leads lawyers (and judges) to mug for the camera in ways deleterious to the sober administration of justice” (Alsop, 2021b, para. 4).

POLITICAL CONTENT

Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Reddit, Snapchat and TikTok are among the social media communication sites hosting political discussion. From #MeToo to #BlackLivesMatter and #BlackTwitter, social media communication may spark and cultivate cascading political and social movements. During the #COVID global pandemic, of 2020–2022, salient health and safety issues competed with cyclical political campaign information. The Twitter ban of Donald Trump during the U.S. Capitol riots and aftermath lowered the volume for his millions of followers.

Global misinformation, malinformation and disinformation campaigns continue to pollute social media communication streams. Polarized political crowds communicating within filter bubbles and echo chambers offer little opportunity for meaningful political engagement within the public sphere. The news media industry struggled to adapt to new practices honed by social marketers, and

citizen journalists sometimes raised the level of noise across platforms. The extent to which social media has an effect on public opinion formation remains an active research topic, and trust and credibility continue to be foundational within persuasion and propaganda studies. The rise of social media political thought leaders widened traditional news and opinion gatekeeping because barriers to entry remain low. A challenge for opinion leaders is to break through the stream of partisan noise.

PARTISAN POSTS

Social media news users are unique because they may see comments on a post before reading a story (Gearhart, Moe & Holland, 2021). If a reader sees comments “before assessing and reading the article,” then “this change presents a new opportunity for audiences to be influenced by the hostile media effect” (Gearhart, Moe & Holland, 2021, p. 434). Partisans may view such content as “biased against their own opinion” (Gearhart, Moe & Holland, 2021, p. 434). Gearhart, Moe and Holland (2021) tested the issues of climate change and abortion in an experiment and found statistically significant differences between them. When a reader saw “likeminded comments” the story tended to be perceived as “less biased,” and “online comments might produce a priming effect on other users” (Gearhart, Moe & Holland, 2021, p. 444). Episodic news events are subject to real-time social media interpretation of contested facts.

Box 1.3: Case Study: Union Safety Issues

On the movie set of *Rust*, a struggle in 2021 had been brewing between union members and the film’s producers. The desert filming about 50 miles outside Albuquerque, New Mexico coupled with long hours apparently helped create a dangerous situation. Among the concerns were “several accidental discharges of prop guns” (Conley, 2021, para. 3). An accidental shooting death of a cinematographer during the filming by actor and producer Alec Baldwin reportedly followed resignations by crew members replaced with non-union staff. AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler (@lizshuler) jumped on Twitter to say that, “No capital, product or profit should ever – ever – come at the expense of somebody’s

life.” The “...set incident was a tragedy and a heartbreaking example of why production companies MUST take the safety & protection of our filmmakers more seriously” (Conley, 2021, paras 9–10). Shuler’s call for safety above profits was both a message to her more than 25,000 Twitter followers, as well as news media that reported the statements. This was an example of how officials with verified Twitter “blue checkmark” accounts use the platform to release statements directly to the public – sometimes instead of a traditional press release. The International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) includes about 60,000 behind-the-scenes workers for television and film productions. Labor activists and reporter Chris Brooks (@ahactivist) was among those sharing a *Los Angeles Times* story about the fatal shooting that included a photo of Baldwin from the movie set. Brooks said there was “a walkout to protest unsafe conditions,” but union members “were then forcefully replaced by scabs” (Conley, 2021, para. 13). In the more than one century of labor organizing and action, many industries have used non-union workers to try to pressure union members. In an age of social media communication, Twitter and other real-time social media communication sites may be the rhetorical narrative battlefield for political struggles over working conditions. Labor-management relations are one of numerous political areas where social media may spark heightened rhetoric and social conflict. The National Labor Relations Board, for example, has reminded employers that employees have a legal right to use Facebook and other sites to engage in criticism about their workplaces.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

In the absence of healthy democratic behavior and the rise of social media and Internet ownership concentration, some members of the U.S. Congress have called for regulation of the major platforms. However, there are no guarantees that government regulation would curb political extremism or lead to smarter social media use. “Facebook derives its power from that (3 billion users) scale and the degree to which we depend on the Blue App, Instagram, and WhatsApp for our social interactions and virtual identities” (Vaidhyathan, 2021, para. 5).

While European and some U.S. state regulators focused on data privacy, potential antitrust and content regulation raise troubling First Amendment concerns. In short, rapid technological and social change represent a fundamental disruption to existing political, economic and social power over individuals' leisure. At the international level, France and Australia have used copyright laws to challenge Google and protect news publishers. France fined Google 500 million euros and gave the company two months to propose "how it will compensate publishers and news agencies for their content" (Charlton & Chan, 2021, paras 1–2). The European Union has targeted Google and other technology companies over their use of content and has sought compensation for it. Google and Facebook licensed content in Australia following a new law that forced them to pay publishers. At the same time, YouTube banned Sky News for one week over news stories that challenged effectiveness of masks and social distancing during COVID-19 because the social media platform considered the content a violation of its misinformation rules (Wright, 2021). YouTube also banned U.S. Senator Rand Paul for one week after he challenged the effectiveness of using masks to fight the pandemic, and he threatened to leave the site. At the same time, he disclosed that, "...his wife bought stock in Gilead Sciences – which makes an antiviral drug used to treat COVID-19 – on Feb. 26, 2020, before the threat from the coronavirus was fully understood by the public and before it was classified as a pandemic by the World Health Organization" (Stanley-Becker, 2021, para. 1). Paul was the first senator to test positive during the pandemic, and he frequently challenged policies during the global spread of the coronavirus. The communication used within political debates over how to respond to the pandemic is a challenge for social platforms that need to set appropriate boundaries.

The World Health Organization struggled to keep pace with changing realities during the pandemic and eventually created an **infodemic** framework. An "overabundance of information – some accurate and some not" led the WHO to focus on "[r]eliable and trustworthy information" (World Health Organization, 2021, p. iv). Among the public health agenda priorities was to, "Strengthen the amplification of messages and actions from trusted actors and communities that need the information" (World Health Organization, 2021, p. 3). The WHO adopted a model that begins with, "Social listening to understand the public's concerns and misinformation," and that leads to "ongoing monitoring, realtime insights and strategy refinement" (World Health Organization, 2021, p. 5).

The WHO concluded that, "communication is key and crucial, and requires expertise and evidence of impact" (World Health Organization, 2021, p. 6). The information management framework suggested a need for refinement of research methods and data science tools to "monitor changes in population needs" (World

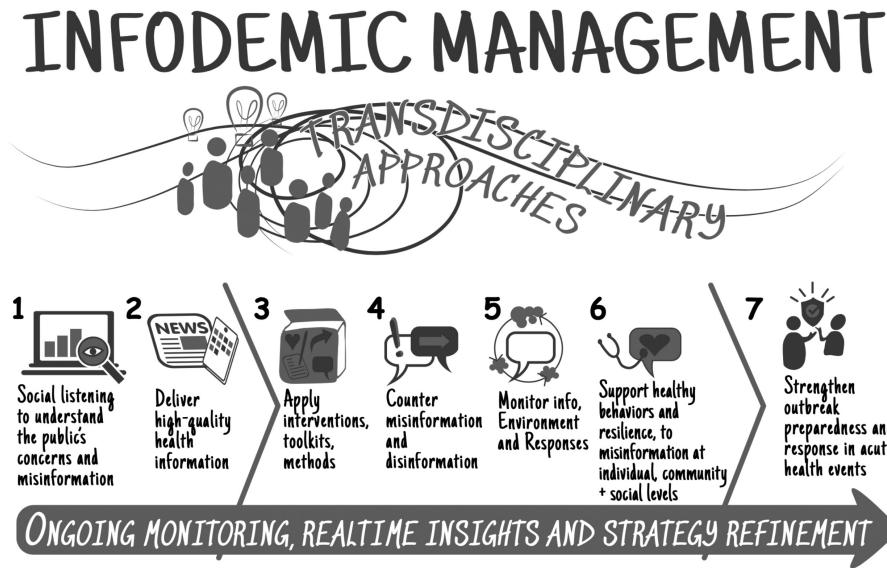


FIGURE 1.2 *The WHO Responded To Policy Criticism.* Courtesy World Health Organization (2021)

Health Organization, 2021, p. 14). The COVID pandemic helped public health officials better understand the power of social media communication.

Political communication may be manipulated within homogenous subgroup social networks on sites such as Twitter (Himmelboim, McCreery, & Smith, 2013). Exposure to partisan political content within network clusters – liberal or conservative – leaves audience members susceptible to campaign misinformation and disinformation that merely reinforces existing beliefs, plays upon fears and uses **conversion** marketing strategies to promote action.

The regulation of social media communication is filled with challenges. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) also sought to regulate using antitrust law against Facebook, but a federal judge initially ruled that there was a lack of evidence provided in the complaint (Balsamo & Gordon, 2021). Regulatory fines, though, historically have been relatively small “slap of the wrist” checks against massive corporate power, wealth and legal resources. It is noteworthy that governments have the political power to reign in previously unchecked social media giants through new statute laws. Across the globe, as we will see throughout this book, governments and social media sites have tangled over attempts to regulate social media communication.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How will future politicians use Twitter and other social media channels to attempt influence over public opinion?
2. In what ways have audience members learned to respond to misinformation, malinformation and disinformation within social media sites?
3. How effective do you believe social media sites terms of service (ToS) contracts are in limiting the impact of bad actors on democratic political communication?

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Social Media Communication Theories

“Although it was sloppy and didn’t have very good reach, it was an elaborate setup”

Nathaniel Gleicher (@ngleicher), Facebook, security policy leader (2021)

Nathaniel Gleicher spoke to news media in 2021 after Facebook banned a company responsible for spreading false information about two manufacturers of coronavirus vaccines (Klepper, 2021). Pfizer and AstraZeneca apparently had been targeted by “a mysterious advertising agency operating out of Russia that sought to pay social media influencers to smear COVID-19 vaccines” (Klepper, 2021, para. 1). Fazze was an advertising and marketing company connected to at least 65 Facebook and 243 Instagram accounts (Klepper, 2021, para. 2):

One claimed AstraZeneca’s shot would turn a person into a chimpanzee. The fake accounts targeted audiences in India, Latin America and, to a lesser extent, the U.S., using several social media platforms including Facebook and Instagram.
(Klepper, 2021, para. 3)

It was not clear why the paid or **sponsored** misinformation campaign happened, but Russia's Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine was a competitor. Fazze's social influence strategy was exposed by people in France and Germany who had been approached to be paid for making the false postings. A popular French influencer on YouTube, Léo Grasset (@dirtybiology), was among those asked to make posts on the Meta Facebook, Inc. sites, as well as TikTok and YouTube, that were critical of the Pfizer vaccine. "Too many red flags," he said. "I decided not to do it" (Klepper, 2021, para. 14). Grasset had thousands of social media followers across the most popular platforms, and marketers frequently turn to influencers to help spread content across social networks in what researchers would term a multistep flow of communication and influence.

The Fazze company was "a subsidiary of UK-registered marketing firm AdNow, which primarily conducted its operations from Russia," and targeted "audiences in India, Latin America and, to a smaller extent, the United States" with anti-vaccination content (Culliford, 2021, para. 2). The "disinformation laundromat" campaign used "misleading articles and petitions on forums like **Reddit**, Medium and Change.org," as well as "fake accounts" on Facebook and Instagram (Culliford, 2021, para. 3). The spread of **conspiracy theories** and other false information included "Planet of the Apes" movie scenes and a claim that the "AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine would turn people into chimpanzees" (Culliford, 2021, para. 5).

Pandemic desperation also fueled interest in misinformation about the Ivermectin animal and human parasite drug as a self-medication to fight the coronavirus (Robins-Early, 2021). In Peru, the pharmacy shelves emptied, and a black market developed: "Ivermectin proponents in multiple countries have touted the drug as a solution to the pandemic, leaving public health officials scrambling to correct the record" (Robins-Early, 2021, para. 8). The global spread of misinformation and disinformation arrived in Bolivia, and a Facebook account video was shared more than 285,000 times (Robins-Early, 2021, para. 17). The South American infatuation with the drug as a miracle cure spread to Europe during the second wave of the global pandemic. By August 2021, U.S. prescriptions were in the thousands each week, as the pandemic hit the unvaccinated. Science remained inconclusive about its effectiveness, but South American use continued amid extremely high numbers of deaths from COVID.

Some disinformation campaigns about the pandemic used a classic model of spreading ideas to spark personal influence – social media engagement, such as reacting or sharing content to others within social networks. Opinion leaders may have the power to convince followers to form an opinion, buy a product or change behaviors. The Russian government has been known to deploy social media tactics to make it look better compared to the United States and other countries. As

many as eight in ten U.S. surveyed adults responded that they believed or were not sure about a false COVID pandemic statement (Terry, 2021). More than one-third of respondents believed that the government was exaggerating the number of COVID-19 deaths. Misinformation and disinformation have spread amid weakening traditional news organization gatekeeping. For example, Alden Global Capital quickly grew to be one of the largest U.S. newspaper chains by “managing intense cost cuts and layoffs” (Arbel, 2021, para. 1). Without as many journalists to sift through raw information and interpret facts, pandemic lies may flow directly to the public. Hedge fund profits, then, come at the societal expense of political truth.

The digital disruption of the Internet, social media and Web 3 continues to impact nearly every sector of the global economy. The U.S. stock market, for example, has been targeted by investors in the 24 Exchange that was based in Bermuda (Li, 2021). The crypto site received backing from Steve Cohen, a hedge-fund billionaire who owns the New York Mets. Dmitri Galinov, CEO for the 24 Exchange, noted: “If Elon Musk tweets something on Saturday, people would want to buy or sell Tesla stock” (Li, 2021, para. 3). At the same time, the Twitter board accepted Musk’s offer to buy the company and take it private. A new group of young stock traders “entered the market during the coronavirus pandemic,” and there are concerns about market speculation that could lead to a financial crisis (Li, 2021, para. 5). The connection between social media communication, such as tweets, and sharp market fluctuation increasingly is a concern.

RETURN TO MEDIA COMMUNICATION THEORIES, CONCEPTS, CONSTRUCTS AND MODELS

Traditional media communication theories acknowledged the potential for knowledge gaps to exist among people who failed to read the news, but high social media users may read a lot of propaganda spread via algorithms that promote sticky content. Prior engagement with conspiracy theories, for example, may lead to more exposure that reinforces prior leanings. Media effects, “episodic” news, agenda-setting, priming, and framing dominate political communication research programs, but social media have sparked re-examination (Hall, 2022, pp. 38–65), “Reverse agenda-setting” has been used to describe the impact of social media user content creation and distribution:

YouTube video and social media have accelerated the way that a compelling photo or video shot at the scene of an event can personalize a story from around the world, go viral on the Internet, be picked up as online video news, and set the agenda for discussion on TV, in priming, and online.

(Hall, 2022, pp. 47–48)

Beyond the immediate nature of social media communication, user content creation “changed the power relationship between formerly closed system of mass media and their readers and viewers” (Hall, 2022, p. 99).

The media communication field for about a century has explored personal influence and opinion leadership, and much of this research may be applied to social media questions about political communication. Frequently, social media influence has the potential to persuade engaged audience members. Too often, though, a vocal minority has a share of voice (SoV) within the social **conversation** that may create a spiral of silence and a false perception of a majority opinion. The power of a social crowd to leap over traditional news media gatekeeping and directly **reach** audiences, raise awareness, spark engagement and cultivate interactive online communities is both a challenge and opportunity.

Political communication research appears to be focused upon persuasive advocacy, agenda-setting and priming, campaigns and elections, framing global political narratives, effects from misinformation or disinformation campaigns, media technologies, political news and advertising, questions from a political economy perspective of ownership, entertainment and rhetorical communication and public opinion that drives new social movements. This provides a rich and complex set of concerns at a time of our response to the ongoing global pandemic.

Box 2.1: Pandemic Personal Influence Via Facebook

A Virginia man posted a hospital-bed **Facebook Live** video to urge people to take the COVID vaccine – something he failed to do during a busy time in he and his wife’s life (Ciechalski, 2021). Travis Campbell said: “I’m testifying to all my bulletproof friends that’s holding out, it’s time to protect your family, it’s not worth getting long-term lung damage or death... please go get the vaccine” (Ciechalski, 2021, para. 7).

Campbell repeatedly appeared from his hospital bed with an oxygen tube and struggling to breathe. Below the video, Facebook added a COVID message.

“Visit the COVID-19 Information Center for vaccine resources.
Get vaccine info”

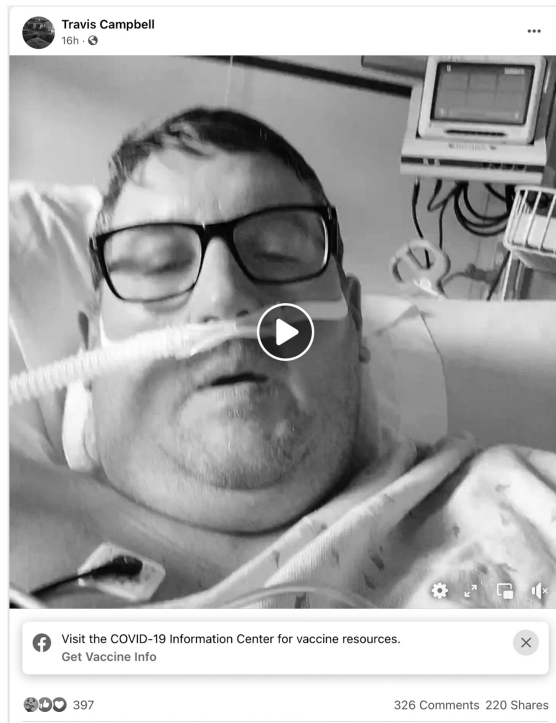


FIGURE 2.1 *Travis Campbell Public Facebook (2021)*

Campbell's use of Facebook spoke to the point that some of the unvaccinated were not ideological, but rather that they had not prioritized getting a shot.

Campbell's public videos received hundreds of reactions, comments and shares from his Facebook wall. "Thanks for bravely sharing your story and helping to inform others about the risks of not being vaccinated," one comment read. "You are helping to save lives." The videos showed Campbell struggling to breathe. The stories were re-told in news media, and a pharmacist claimed that the attention prompted unvaccinated people to get the shot. After what he described as a long night, Campbell posted:

If you went and got vaccinated since participating in my videos, would you mind to post a picture on this post for my family... please. I am so thankful to see so

many people believe in their selves and get protected. It makes me feel a sense of purpose that my friends and loved ones will live on! I love each and every one of y'all.

(Campbell, 2021, August 5)

Personal and mediated social influence may quickly spread across social networks through narrative social media storytelling. In this case, the emotional content attracted attention and sparked **organic** engagement. The interactive nature of social media communication allowed audience members to join family and friends in sending well-wishes to Campbell and his wife.

One challenge during the pandemic was that medical professionals also were exposed to misinformation. Doximity, a social network for doctors with 1.8 million members, included comments that claimed the vaccines were “experimental, unproven or deadly” (Levy, 2021, paras 3, 5). The site used “algorithms and clinical editors” to aggregate content that is interesting to a reader (Levy, 2021, para. 18). Still, there was clearly confusion among medical professionals about vaccine safety, so it is understandable that the problem was worse among the general public relying upon media with varying degrees of **credibility**.

Box 2.2: Doximity Community Guidelines

Community Guidelines

Conversations exchanged on Doximity reflect the views of a diverse community of clinicians. Doximity is designed to be a safe and respectful space for expression and discussion. We require members to conduct themselves on our network in the same manner as they would offline in a professional medical setting...

What Types of Comments Is Doximity NOT Interested In?

Doximity acknowledges and respects the value of different opinions, and our policies reflect our impartiality. That said, we ask that

members refrain from posting inappropriate, inaccurate, or objectionable content on any Doximity platform. Consider your audience when sharing something that may offend others and don't use Doximity as a soapbox.

We reserve the right to remove content that we deem inappropriate, examples of which are listed below:

1. Discriminatory remarks based on race or ethnic origin, religion, disability, gender, age, nationality, physical appearance, political affiliation, veteran status, sexual orientation/gender identity, or medical specialty;
2. Offensive or non-professional remarks and opinions;
3. Unprofessional communications directed at particular credentials;
4. Obscenity, vulgarity, or profanity;
5. Advertising, solicitations, or spam;
6. Defamatory personal attacks, insults, or threats;
7. Comments intended to bait, antagonize, or provoke;
8. Off-topic commentary or SHOUTING;
9. URLs posted without context or accompanying text;
10. Spreading false or misleading information;
11. Posting comments that disclose personally identifiable health information of patients or otherwise violate patient privacy.

Please note that the above is not an exhaustive list. We reserve the right to remove comments that are not consistent with our Community Guidelines as described herein...

Content That Contradicts Widely Accepted Public Health Guidelines

... Doximity will remove any content that contradicts widely accepted public health guidelines without evidence-based support. This includes but is not limited to content that:

- Discourages observance of good public health behaviors as outlined by national authorities (e.g., social distancing, public masking, appropriate hand-washing hygiene, etc.);
- Promulgates unverified claims about the effectiveness, side effects, or implications of vaccination with FDA-authorized vaccines;
- Claims public health authorities are knowingly disseminating false or harmful information; ...
- Promulgates false data about deaths, hospitalizations, infection rates associated with infectious disease; and
- Claims unverified treatments are curative or viable alternatives to vaccination.

To the greatest extent possible, Doximity will not remove respectful expressions of skepticism; professional criticisms of infectious disease policy or public actors; or the sharing of clearly personal opinions and anecdotes...

Source: Doximity.com (2021)

Stress between allowing free expression and a desire to edit for accuracy helps explain why misinformation and disinformation leak into public conversation. Online media may not be the best context for social learning, and there is a likelihood for confusion and misunderstanding of accurate information compared to content that is designed to manipulate public opinion.

FIGHTING KNOWLEDGE GAPS

The global pandemic was known for the spread of misinformation and disinformation, but social media sites also helped to fight back by sharing counter-propaganda and other information that attempted to tell the truth about COVID deaths. Some of these messages included “sticky” social media content that may or may not be considered ethical communication. The r/HermanCainAward Reddit site, for example, focused on stories about people who “mocked COVID-19 vaccines before eventually dying from the disease” (Rodriguez, 2021, para. 1). It reportedly launched in September of 2020 and grew to more than 375,000 users (Rodriguez, 2021, para. 2). Rodriguez (2021), @SAL19, reported that Reddit

users upload screenshots multiple times a day of people who previously posted anti-vaccine comments and content on Facebook only to end up getting sick with COVID-19 before dying. The name of the subreddit refers to former Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain, who died from COVID-19 in July 2020, after refusing to wear a mask and attending a Donald Trump re-election campaign event (Rodriguez, 2021, para. 10). “The forum has been the 10th fastest-growing subreddit over the past 30 days, according to FrontPageMetrics.com, which tracks Reddit usage” (Rodriguez, 2021, para. 12). Some subreddit users told CNBC that the site convinced them to go ahead with vaccination. Reddit is often not given as much news media attention as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok. In October of 2021, /r/antiwork surpassed Reddit growth of popular channels, such as /r/funny, /r/memes, /r/movies and others. This suggested that knowledge about serious topics has been spreading on Reddit (Front Page Metrics, 2021).

Knowledge gap communication research has focused on the divide between those who have information and those who do not. The so-called “digital divide” sometimes addressed the need to reach all of the public with Internet connections and broadband access to high-speed use of video and other rich media content. In rural areas, for example, it has not been cost-effective to build 5G high-speed telecommunication networks that reach sparse populations.

USES AND GRATIFICATION

Media users have been found to be active in their decisions to attend to specific channels based upon the ability of sites to meet their psychological expectation of rewards. Social media communication platforms may have varying effects on users:

It can have a weakening effect on strong democratic regimes, an intensifying effect on strong authoritarian regimes, a radicalizing effect on weak democratic regimes, and a destabilizing effect on weak authoritarian regimes. There are a number of possible approaches U.S. policymakers can take to decrease the effects of social media platforms and to guarantee citizens the right to freedom of opinion based on reliable, pluralistic, and objectively sourced information.

(Schleffer & Miller, 2021, para. 1)

“Destabilization” may be found “in weak authoritarian regimes when social media platforms facilitate the coordination and mobilization of dissidents and grassroots movements (which represent domestic opposition) in resisting the government’s

tyranny” (Schleffer & Miller, 2021, para. 30). In other words, social media communication may be used as a tool of political power, for example, in Russia’s Ukraine invasion. Platform algorithms help foster filter bubbles — spaces where false information quickly spreads within echo chambers. It is unclear how effective official government information may be within social and political contexts that lack fundamental trust amid “information cascades” that may be viewed with suspicion by supporters and opponents of salient political issues (Schleffer & Miller, 2021, para. 94).

One study found that only 9 percent of social media users engage in political or social issues: “Roughly a fifth of those who never or rarely post about these issues say that among major reasons for this are not having anything to add to the conversation, not paying close attention to political or social issues, or not wanting to offend others” (McClain, 2021, para. 3). Pew Research Center survey respondents said they never or rarely post (70 percent) about political and social issues because they:

1. Don’t want the things they post or share to be used against them (33 percent)
2. Don’t want to be attacked for their views (32 percent)
3. Don’t have anything to add to the conversation (23 percent)
4. Not something they pay close attention to (21 percent)
5. Don’t want to offend others (20 percent)

Pew surveyed U.S. adults September 8–13, 2020 (Schleffer & Miller, 2021, para. 4).

Beyond potential spiral of silence over fear of retribution, Bleier, Lietz and Strohmaier (2018) found that social media sites contribute to audience fragmentation. Campaign political communication tends to focus on salient issues being talked about within social media channels instead of abstract policies. The agenda-setting impact of social media appears to be complex given the specific interaction between candidates and potential voters. At the same time, traditional news media agenda-setting may persist when it comes to the most salient topics. It remains difficult to generalize from specific research studies.

Agenda-setting, the phenomenon that considers the relative power of news media, political actors and the public to frame messages and influence others, is but one of many communication theories and models that may be deployed to better understand social media communication within a political context. Trust may be seen as a function of source and message credibility. A highly trusted source sharing trustworthy social content would be expected to have the best chance of influencing others. However, those who already believe conspiracy

theories are susceptible to reinforcement of their incorrect preconceptions. The framing of sticky social media content, such as memes, spreads across the Internet through a **diffusion** process that values change-agent voices. If an audience believes that the current political system is broken, then she, he or they may value radical disruption of the system. Over time, new misinformation, “malinformation” and **disinformation** may cultivate long-term effects, such as a propensity for violence. The cultivation communication theory has suggested that the drum-beat of messaging over long periods of time may distort a perception of social reality.

EMERGING THEORIES

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) focuses on how mediated interpersonal interaction may replicate face-to-face communication at scale. It depends upon the existence of perceived trust for speakers and messages. The credibility acceptance begins with how social actors use their media personas to present an identity, interact with another or a mass public and cultivate civic engagement. The creation and maintenance of online communities through human-computer interaction (HCI) clearly depends upon online relationships that build and leverage social capital through their social networks. Each dyadic connection of accounts, as well as the relative positioning of an influencer within a growing social network, produces important opportunities to use electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) practices. This may be for spreading political messages, marketing to the public, or further building social capital to be used later.

One area for promising social media news research is the potential “relationship between emotion and engagement” (Choi, Lee & Ji, 2021, p. 1017). A recent study of major newspaper Facebook pages noted that the definition for user engagement has been incoherent, but data show that, “When people post and share news-related experiences, they are more involved with the content” (Choi, Lee & Ji, 2021, p. 1019). In this study, the “most prominent” Facebook reaction was “sadness” (Choi, Lee & Ji, 2021, p. 1032). The study also found that positive news and emotion promoted reaction: “The findings indicate that reacting is a unique kind of engagement behavior that warrants a more careful examination” (Choi, Lee & Ji, 2021, p. 1032).

PERSUASION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Organizations increasingly are engaging in corporate social advocacy (CSA), as they promote corporate social responsibility (CSR). Engagement with the public

about social issues may be explored across “cognitive, affective and behavioral responses” to messages and campaigns (Hong & Li, 2020, p. 160). The “triad-relation” interaction between a company, cause and consumers typically leads to supporters, opponents, and neutral actors vis-à-vis the issues (Hong & Li, 2020, p. 162). “Consumer-company congruence, company-cause fit, and consumer-cause fit are all cognitive evaluations, which can generate consonance or dissonance and impact attitudes and behaviors” (Hong & Li, 2020, p. 163). The application of cognitive dissonance theory and methods is one example of applying traditional constructs to new problems. “Specifically, consumers can be segmented into three groups – boycotters, supporter, and noncoters – based on their boycott and purchase intentions, as well as perceived corporate reputation” (Hong & Li, 2020, p. 171). From a public relations (PR) perspective, CSR engagement may place an organization within a public controversy, and may lead to a crisis situation (Chen & Tao, 2020). Political views may interact with company and product “evaluation” (Chen & Tao, 2020, p. 189). Organizational-public relationships (OPRs) may lead to “co-creation of social value” (Lee, Kim & Kim, 2020, p. 198). “Issue-related situational factors can also influence a public’s engagement with a company’s CSR activity” (Lee, Kim & Kim, 2020, p. 201). Important variables may include corporate social responsibility (CSR) and:

- Awareness (problem recognition);
- Self-efficacy (constraint recognition);
- Issue connection (involvement recognition); and
- Prior experiences (referent criterion)

(Lee, Kim & Kim, 2020, p. 202).

Lee, Kim & Kim (2020) found that these related to a “situational motivation” predicting CSR participation (Lee, Kim & Kim, 2020, p. 213). Organizations may create PR campaigns around political issues as a demonstration of CSR, but they and their social media audiences may have distinct reasons for acting or not. Any organization engaged in CSR campaigns may face the risk of an “association spillover mechanism” (Chen & Tao, 2020, p. 178). Pompper (2018) suggested that CSR may be a “tactic” used by PR people in reacting to events instead of reflecting “corporate conscience” (Pompper, 2018, p. 12). Within political communication, CSR also may be a way for organizations to align with powerful actors who can respond by offering later favorable treatment. The combination of opinion leadership and social marketing tactics needs further research exploration within campaign cycles and between them.

CASE STUDY: HOW KEYWORD TARGETING INFLUENCES WHAT YOU SEE

Social marketers strive to understand frequent changes in the **search engine optimization (SEO)** and **search engine result placements (SERP)** algorithms that determine what you find at the top of Google or other sites. The secret can be found within testing “topics” and “phrases” – so-called “key-phrases” – that are used within content writing (Crestodina, 2021, para. 6). These trigger how Google connects what you search for with available and relevant content:

Another clue: look for the bolded text within search results when you search.

Google bolds the phrase that you search for, making search results easier to scan.

But they also bold closely related grammatical forms and synonyms.

(Crestodina, 2021, para. 8)

Within a political campaign for example, candidates and issues may be related to specific topics and phrases. At the same time, bad actors may exploit the SEO techniques to create sticky content that quickly spreads across social media communication. A sophisticated connection between keywords that people commonly use to search for sites and content that rises to the top of a Google page, means that media and information literacy skills are very important. Users must be able to critically examine search results because top content frequently is not the most credible. Rather, it is the result of those marketers understanding the search rules on behalf of a paid **client**. Going forward, marketers can use specialized technical knowledge to connect people with future opportunities:

Hardware at our disposal is becoming more and more and more powerful with every passing day. While quantum computers are still solving the error correction challenge, they are much closer to reality and hand over unparalleled computing power to us.

(Kaushik, 2021, para. 20)

A view of the future is one in which computer software will use artificial intelligence machine learning to amass information with small amounts of **measurement error** about people and surgically target them with, for example, political communication content. This would be steps beyond current targeted advertising messages based upon demographics and psychographics. Advanced user profiling across digital channels, however, raises new privacy concerns.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can public health officials counter misinformation about claims of miracle cures for the coronavirus?
2. How do you judge which news and information to believe about the global pandemic? What are some of the warning signs for misinformation, malinformation or disinformation?
3. What could governments and businesses do to prepare for future global crises that require them to speak on social media channels?

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Political and Social Media Communication Methods

“Built with few data-protection safeguards, it risks becoming the high-tech jackboots of a surveillance state”

Frank Bajak (@fbajak), AP Tech Editor, The Associated Press (2021, September 7)

Collection of data may be used for good or bad purposes. When the Taliban quickly took power in Afghanistan, they gained control over U.S. created **biometric** and other individual data (Bajak, 2021). “As the Taliban get their governing feet, there are worries it will be used for social control and to punish perceived foes” (Bajak, 2021, para. 2). Shortly after the August 2021 retreat of U.S. forces after two decades, “People are getting ominous and threatening phone calls, texts and WhatsApp messages” (Bajak, 2021, para. 5). Civil liberties may be quickly lost in an age when we leave so much data on Facebook and other social **media communication** channels. Compared to previous social science methods, wide availability of data not protected by academic methods of protocol review means that personal information falls into the hands of those with a variety of motives for using the data. Beyond this, social network analysis paints a visual picture of

the social graph – our friends, family and business connections. For example, the U.S. government has raised privacy and national security concerns about popular Chinese app TikTok that challenged Instagram for users.

SURVEY DATA AND PUBLIC OPINION

Survey data collection and analysis continues to be a popular method for gathering indicators about how people respond to current topics of interest. Pew Research Center, for example, found that about 70 percent of Americans reported in surveys that they use social media sites, and these data have not changed much in the past five years. “YouTube and Facebook continue to dominate the online landscape, with 81% and 69%, respectively, reporting ever using these sites” (Auxier & Anderson, 2021, para. 2). The data showed that YouTube and Reddit were the only sites with statistically significant overall growth during the 2019 to 2021 period. However, TikTok experienced rapid growth, and more than half of young U.S. adults used it Instagram, or Snapchat. Pew surveys also have found partisan political differences among users of some social media sites. As the COVID-19 pandemic raged, some younger healthcare workers used TikTok to battle those opposed to masks and coronavirus vaccines.

Shearer and Mitchell (2021) reported Pew Research Center data about tweeting the news. The multi-method study paired survey results with tweets:

...the Center examined tweets from more than 500 U.S. adults who took part in the May 2021 survey, provided researchers with a valid, public Twitter handle and sent at least one news-related tweet between June 12 and Aug. 31, 2021. Researchers then grouped these Americans’ news tweets into major topic areas and examined other aspects of each tweet, such as whether it included the author’s personal opinion and whether it was an original tweet, a retweet, a reply or a quote tweet.

(Shearer & Mitchell, 2021, para. 2)

Studies have found that a small number of Twitter users post most of the content, but the Pew research focused on “the behavior of the *average user*, regardless of their tweet frequency” (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021, para. 4). The study found that more than eight in ten Twitter users tweeted at least once during an 11-week window: “...most of those who tweeted about news did so relatively infrequently – with 55% tweeting between one and nine times during the period studied” (Shearer & Mitchell, 2021, para. 5). This was a behavioral study:

For this analysis, we initially surveyed 2,548 U.S. adult Twitter users in May 2021. Everyone who took part in this survey is a member of the Center's American Trends Panel (ATP) – an online survey panel that is recruited through national, random sampling of residential addresses – and indicated that they use Twitter. The survey also included 1,026 respondents who volunteered a valid Twitter handle (their unique user name preceded by an "@" sign) for research purposes. This allowed the Center to analyze their actual (observed) behaviors on the platform. Of these Twitter users, 620 tweeted publicly at least once, and 512 tweeted about news or current events at least once. The sample analyzed here comes from tweets produced by respondents with public accounts who tweeted from June 12 to Aug. 31, 2021.

(Shearer & Mitchell, 2021, para. 7)

Pew Research Center also searched for links, photographs and video. They hand-coded tweet content for news or not, news topic, COVID-19 pandemic references, and presence of personal opinions.

The study found that users most frequently tweeted about entertainment in 2021 – consistent with results from 2015. Tweets about government and politics, however, grew from 17 percent to 26 percent over six years. In the same period, sports tweets dropped from 25 to 12 percent, perhaps due to increased competition from Instagram, TikTok and other social media platforms. Sports content has dramatically grown on TikTok, as ESPN was an early leader in 2022. Tweets about health – even during a pandemic – modestly grew from 2 to 8 percent. We know from other research that some nurses and doctors used TikTok videos from inside hospitals to show how the pandemic stressed resources.

EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH

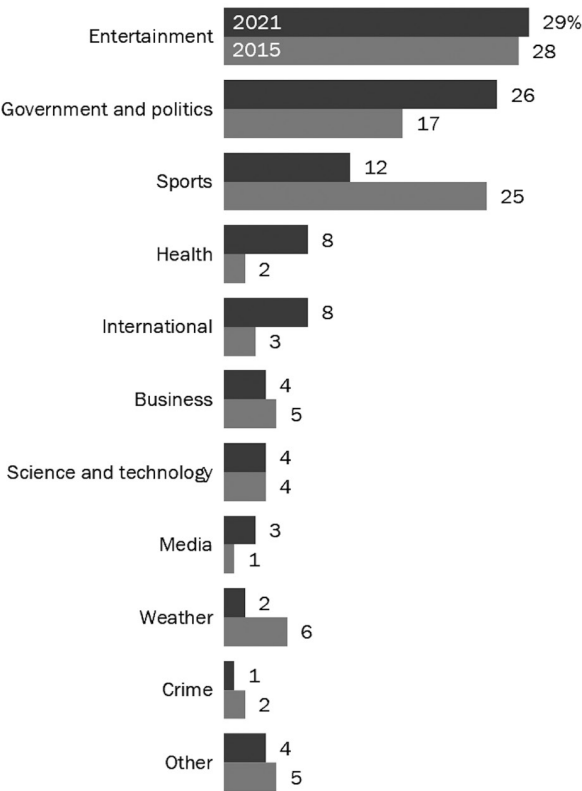
A/B testing of social media messages or between groups focuses on observation of individual behaviors with a goal of finding variables that could indicate "causal relationships" (Treadwell, 2014, p. 173). Causality may be established between an independent (A) variable and dependent (B) variable and requires:

- A must precede B in time.
- A and B must vary together (covariance).
- B must demonstrably be caused by A and not by something else.

(Treadwell, 2014, p. 174)

Entertainment, politics and sports topped the list of subject areas in Americans’ news tweets in 2021

Among U.S. adult Twitter users who tweeted about news, the average share of a user’s news-related tweets that were about each news topic



Note: Shows average among 512 Twitter users in the sample who tweeted about news at least once during the time period studied.
Source: Content analysis of tweets of 512 American Trends Panel members who use Twitter, shared a valid, public handle, and tweeted about news from June 12-Aug. 31, 2021. Tweets were first coded by human coders for including a reference to news or current events; if they were news-related, they were coded for topic.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

FIGURE 3.1 News Tweet Top Subject Areas. Source: Courtesy Pew Research Center (2021)

Experiments tend to happen within psychologically-grounded labs that focus on basic, theory-based research. While the method offers the opportunity to use statistical controls, data may not be generalizable to a population. U.S social media political communication use may vary across type of social media platform, and experiments typically do not account for **real-time social engagement** or behavioral differences. The exception is the field or natural experiment in which the researcher must take things pretty much as they occur” and “raise many... validity problems” (Babbie, 2008, p. 263).

Tsang (2021) studied 280 subjects in an online experiment. The researcher used an anti-police WhatsApp news message during Hong Kong protests to explore perception of source credibility within fake news. The study found that, “...whether a news message was attributed to no source, an online forum, or a legacy news outlet had little influence on its perceived fakeness” (Tsang, 2021, p. 1070). The study also found a need for more research about disinformation strategies because “...individuals are likely to trust news that affirms their beliefs, irrespective of the source’s credibility” (Tsang, 2021, p. 1073).

CONTENT ANALYSIS

Quantitative and qualitative content analyses may be correlated with social media site engagement data. Harlow and Kilgo (2021) studied protest news by focusing on the Women’s March in 2017 – “one of the largest single-day demonstrations ever recorded” (Harlow & Kilgo, 2021, p. 665). “News framing is presented as a key aspect of the protest paradigm” (Harlow & Kilgo, 2021, p. 667). At the same time, participants and their networks of friends, family, colleagues and others may engage within social media about a large event. Social media users engaging with and sharing news about events may be called “gatewatchers” (Harlow & Kilgo, 2021, p. 670). In contrast to traditional news gatekeeping processes, these *active audience members* reflect an interest in involvement with news content. The content analysis found that national news frames included those that referenced spectacle, violence, confrontation, riots, and anti-government topics. The spectacle frame also was dominant for metropolitan and local news, but the debate frame was more important than violent mentions (Harlow & Kilgo, 2021, p. 674). Facebook posts about the event emphasized spectacle, confrontation, riots and violence (Harlow & Kilgo, 2021, p. 675). Both news media and social media had fewer frames about peacefulness, anti-racism, anti-Trump, gender, immigration, and the National Football League (NFL) (Harlow & Kilgo, 2021, pp. 674–675). The researchers found statistically significant relationships between news content and

social media content (Harlow & Kilgo, 2021, p. 676). “Together, these results show that different newspapers’ social media audiences react differently to an article’s framing, elevating the importance of considering the role of audiences—not journalists—in the protest paradigm” (Harlow & Kilgo, 2021, p. 683). It may be that the social media influence on news narrative varies across types of news stories and outlets.

THEMATIC AND RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

Social media content or interview text may be analyzed to generalize about trends within social media communication. For example, one study used in-depth interviews with journalists, as well as website text, social media content and practitioner publications to find that there was “a major shift” related to the addition of “engagement specialists” in newsrooms (Zahay, Jensen, Xia, & Robinson, 2021, p. 1041). The interviews generated about 500 pages of text for analysis:

...our distinction between role conceptions of traditionally oriented and engagement-oriented journalism refers to competing meta-discourses of journalism rather than the job titles of particular journalists, though these titles undoubtedly affect journalists’, citizens’, and scholars’ understanding of the possibilities of journalism.

(Zahay, Jensen, Xia, & Robinson, 2021, p. 1047)

Digital disruption within journalism has been accelerated by the demands of social media, and these have reignited the debate about how to cultivate and maintain audience trust. Multi-method research techniques for studying this may include framing analyses, or studies that rely upon traditional theories, concepts or constructs. The interactive nature of social media engagement also lends itself to exploring the use of personal influence and opinion leadership, diffusion of information and the central role of networks. It is particularly valuable to identify those **early adopters** of a new ideas – social media accounts that help spark the sharing of content.

SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

Social network analysis (SNA) helps researchers and practitioners view visual structures of spreading ideas typically packaged within video, photographs, memes and other rich media content.

Box 3.1: Thought Leader: Marc A. Smith

For 20 or so years, I've been really interested in what happens when people talk to each other through computing. In sociology, we have this notion of collective action, and I've spent a lot of my time thinking through computer-mediated collective action. This reaches back to times before computer screens with color, for example, and the days of Usenet, Bitnet and listserves that still persist.

Birds of a feather tweet to gather. Our early research showed that people are attracted to social media into discussions of controversial or polarizing issues – not because they would like to engage with people who have a different opinion. They do so to seek out people who share their opinion about the low quality of other people's opinions. That pattern appears over and over and over again. Whenever we find controversial topics, we see this social force at work. We have a word for this force: It is called "homophily."

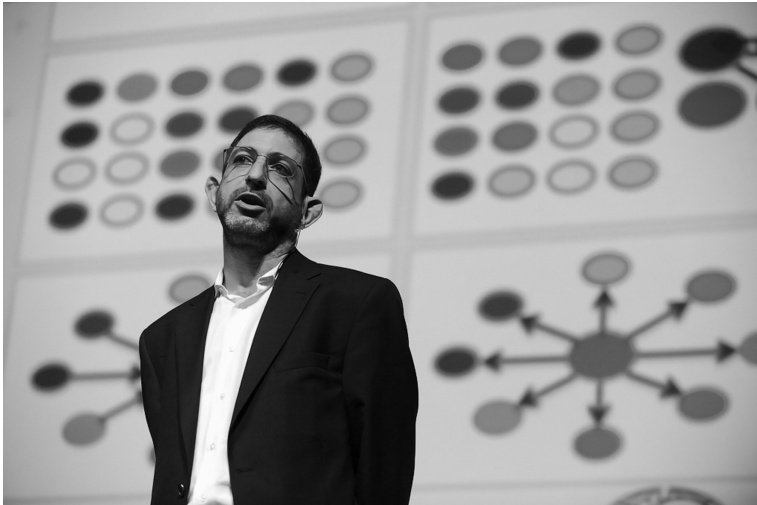


FIGURE 3.2 *Marc A. Smith, NodeXL. Source: Courtesy Marc A. Smith, Social Media Research Foundation and NodeXL*

If you give a bunch of people the ability to sort themselves, they will.

It is difficult to mix people who believe in human rights and people who do not believe in human rights, those are hard belief systems to let sit next to one another. They sort into oil and water groups of humans, and often self-segregate into clusters. If it enrages, it engages.

If the goal is to hold people onto the site, such as Facebook, as long as possible, then content that may be holding people are feelings of rage and righteous indignation. These also serve in group boundary functions. If you feel threatened, then you might want to really amplify your membership in a group because these are safer places to be.

Why is it getting worse? Is it just the tools, or is it the way they're being used? I would argue, it is a combination of the tools and the way they're being used. The tool is itself designed to hold you there as long as possible. It is not about misinformation. Instead, it is about disinformation. It is more about a centralized small group of actors willfully using a mechanism, than it is some kind of increase in the gullibility or the fallibility of humans. Those tools are very effective for very, very small groups of well-funded, highly committed people. It is the era in which the tail does wag the dog.

Less than one percent of the population of social media, essentially establishes the agenda for that discussion. This is not really the era of misinformation. This is the era of disinformation. It is the impact of committed, well-motivated, small groups who do not necessarily have to hold themselves accountable to validity. So, your message can go viral without regard to truth. It is called the power law distribution: the "one-990 law," or the one percent rule, or the internet rule. All of these are just ways of describing this shape of curve. Normal curves describe people's height, and most of us are somewhere between five and six feet. There are no 100-foot-tall people. Wealth is different. There are a lot of people with almost no money. There are a few people with some money, and there are a teeny, tiny number of people with a whopping number of dollars.

That is what we find in social media, all the time. This is the curve for how many people get how many replies, and how many retweets. How central are you? Just how social are social media? The answer is not very

social. As a sociologist, we could set a reciprocity requirement to call it social. Rates of reciprocity are .06 percent within social media sites. What about density? How much do people talk to each other rather than to just some hub? Next to zero. Almost never. It is all celebrity driven.

Social media are about as social as cable television. It happens to be very *rarely* social.

We can fix this problem. Remember that automobiles started off as very, very lethal machines. Now, they are merely lethal.

We should not tell the Facebooks of the world to implement a particular algorithm. We should tell them, instead, that there has to be a way to track and diminish harmful, low-quality information.

Platform policies impact what we see. At the moment, the former president does not have an active Twitter account because it was banned by the site.

European political parties explicitly said that they believe that their agendas are being dragged to more extreme positions in order just to be heard in Facebook. I think this is where it gets very complicated. It is very dangerous if we start saying do this particular thing, rather than enable this particular outcome. The metaphor for social media is changing.

First, we are still calling it social media. It is not clear why, but it is clear that the metaphor is eroding. Imagine the bar at the edge of town where a lot of fights break out on a regular basis. Clearly, the proprietor has no legal responsibility: No, that is not true. The proprietor, where problems happen, has responsibility. So, when you are essentially the telephone company for three billion people, there are three billion conflicts. If you are the venue for those conflicts, then you bear some responsibility.

Mark Zuckerberg and Facebook have created the environment for billions of people to interact, and the corporation must bear responsibility for how they interact. We could introduce other useful metaphors, such as that Facebook could become a *databank*. You make deposits, you earn interest, and you can make withdrawals. At the moment, however, Facebook is a data casino. Users take their chances. Sometimes they win or lose. Facebook currently is not a place to store value.

Remember the Ice Bucket Challenge? Facebook appeared to be a positive social force. There have not been many recent examples. Too often, we confuse peak with average. Everybody would like to use Facebook and win an easy payoff, as if it were a slot machine. I think social media, particularly Facebook, really tried to convey the idea that this is the data casino where you essentially are paid out with free advertising – millions in advertising, potentially hundreds of millions in fundraising, for free, in exchange for user content.

If we were to shift to a data bank, it would be a secure place for content with interest earned. Instead, the Facebook casino allows users to download their data, but without the likes. What about the comments? Not your data.

We could demand more transparency. Could you imagine a large corporation that will not let you see where the money comes from and where it goes? In this case, they may be more open with their financial accounting than they are with their internal social accounts.

These are the venues in which public culture is taking place. If these were physical venues and unlawful activity took place, the owners of those venues are liable. I do not see any problem with some concept of legal liability for hosting content. And in fact, I think what would happen is that there would be best practices for hosting content in a low liability way. There then would be insurance companies that offer content insurance. Then insurance companies should deal with the consequences. It could be the consequence of people losing their lives because they have been told really bad information about public health.

I think that it is an overly complex problem because we have decided that we have to solve it in the large rather than the small. Facebook is a vast nation of three or four billion people with no accountability.

And yet, if Zuckerberg built cars, we would have no problem saying 'hey, put a safety belt in it.' We have no problem saying you cannot sell a car here, if it does not have airbags.

I understand their desire not to be the nanny, or the referee for every conflict on Earth. However, they could build better features. Facebook issues extend beyond the United States. I think about places, such as Myanmar, where a lot of really bad things happened, and Facebook has

significant responsibility in these contexts. They had very few language resources, including employees who could actually read the content. As soon as there is any liability, then there will be insurance against the liability. As soon as there is insurance, then there will be mitigation.

It took a while for our legal system to accept the idea that people who own property can still be accountable for the negative externalities of the use of that property. At the moment, Facebook is in this window where the link between cause and the effect is not yet established, but clearly there is a link between the use of some of the products, and some negative externalities. If you do not pay for any of the mitigation of the negative externality, then profits go up.

Editors of newspapers never said, 'Well, it's just too difficult for us to pay attention to what's being written now.' Facebook created this problem because you can have the locally moral appropriate decision in a three-billion-person venue. Under the conditions of monopoly capitalism, no one intervened when Facebook purchased Instagram and WeChat.

At the moment, what we have is an enormous monoculture. Instagram and Facebook are just becoming one large entity with two different user interfaces, which makes perfect sense from a technology perspective. In every other way, though, it remains problematic. It is the way late-stage capitalism goes.

So, given the data reality, this then means regulation. They are the only game in town, and they have that much power.

Let us just call these things marketplaces of ideas. And my metaphor then asks the question: Where is the accounting software for the marketplace of ideas? There is no accounting, and there are no accountants. Can we find evidence of malfeasance, manipulation, and collusion? Can auditors then use this information for some kind of enforcement action? Can journalists turn to this cadre of auditor accountants, and social accountants? Are ideas spreading on social media actually a reflection of a majority's opinion, or are these amplified opinions of a minority? In democracy we need to be able to accurately assess the opinions of our fellow citizens, and in social media we are in this distorted funhouse mirror maze.

I predict that much like the Pandora Papers is showing hands in cookie jars, we can place faces on social media malfeasance. Could

we use those kinds of techniques to try to make it hurt to inject low quality information into social media? I think we can. I think we can use accounting software – social accounting software.

Marc A. Smith is director of the Social Media Research Foundation, and co-founder of the NodeXL software project.

QUALITATIVE, CRITICAL AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Critical and cultural scholars conduct deep reading of social media communication texts to discover meaning. Qualitative research may stand on its own or be paired with quantitative data. For example, political economy has used a critical lens to understand media industry concentration. As with most new technologies, social media communication began as a highly competitive industry of diverse platforms. Over time, though, many companies fail to compete or are purchased, such as when Facebook (now Meta) spent billions to own Instagram. The tables again appear to be shifting, as TikTok quickly rose to be a top site, and Instagram is left to copy its successful format of highly tuned preference algorithms. The

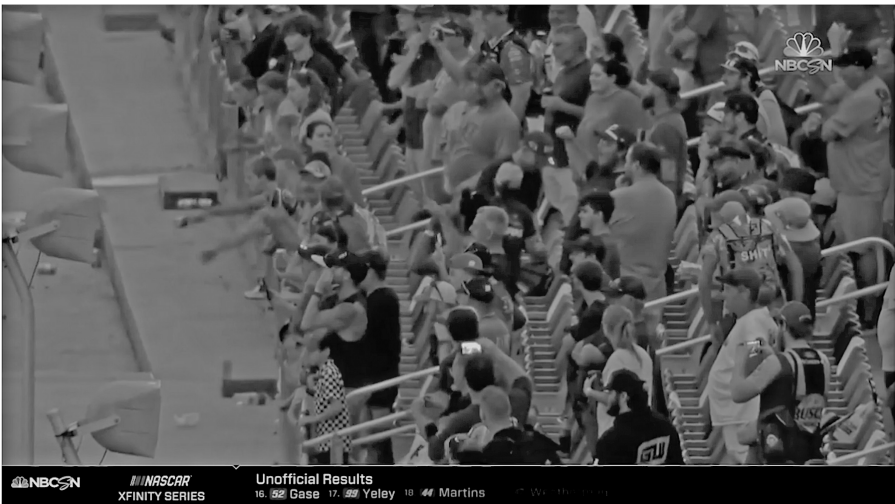


FIGURE 3.3 *NASCAR crowd anti-Biden chant was heard by NBC Sports audience.*
Source: NBCSN, which aired an NASCAR crowd's profane post-race chant.



FIGURE 3.4 *President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill laugh about troll's call. Source: The White House broadcast of the president's Christmas program*

technology attracts video viewers and keeps them on site for sometimes unhealthy amounts of time. Addictive social media content remains an important research topic for those concerned about children and media, but adults also may be adversely affected by social media addiction. Politicians that *play* the popular format of the moment, including memes, such as “Let’s go Brandon,” figure to increase their reach. The NASCAR driver post-race crowd chant that actually means “Fuck Joe Biden” became a way for conservative U.S. politicians to use profanity against the president within a series of memes (Roback & Quintchett, 2021, para. 3).

The meme gained new life during a Christmas Eve call when Biden seemed to misunderstand a political troll:

“Yeah, I hope you have a wonderful Christmas as well. Merry Christmas and let’s go Brandon,” the man told the Bidens just prior to ending the call.

Biden smiled and replied: “Let’s go Brandon. I agree,” as the first lady chuckled. It was unclear whether the president understood the meaning of the right-wing slur. The White House did not respond to *Newsweek*’s request for comment.

(Lemon, 2021, paras 3–4)

Clearly, the social media communication tactic can be seen through critical and cultural analyses as a way to land relevant attacks on Biden between campaigns.

HISTORICAL, LEGAL AND ETHICAL RESEARCH

Historical, legal and ethical researchers may attempt to place political events within a larger context, follow emerging law within the courts, and sort right from ethical wrong. Section 230 U.S. law, for example, was statute law designed to protect Internet service providers (ISPs) in the 1990s. It survived legal challenges even when the courts rejected regulating Internet indecency, as the U.S. has done for nearly a century within the broadcast regulation context. In the absence of clear law, ethical theories and concepts may be helpful in guiding future practices and policies. A lack of transparency and speaker accountability helped fuel pandemic misinformation on social media channels, and researchers may document history. Additionally, they may track legal changes and apply ethical theories.

CASE STUDY: DELTA VIRUS MISINFORMATION

The summer 2021 surge in the Delta variant of COVID-19 appeared to create a simultaneous misinformation spike. One study by Signal Labs found that social media posts mentioning “some phrases prone to vaccine misinformation... jumped as much as five times” (Alba, 2021, para. 5). One post on Gab, for example, falsely claimed that military members refusing a vaccine would face court-marshal, and received thousands of shares and reactions. Another common false claim was that vaccines were dangerous, and caused 45,000 deaths: “Posts with the claim collected... at least 120,000 views on the encrypted chat app Telegram, where it was shared mostly in Spanish” (Alba, 2021, para. 2). Similar global misinformation was found on Facebook. The Signal labs media monitoring found a set of common false information:

- Vaccines don’t work (+437%)
- Vaccines contain microchips (+156%)
- Rely upon natural immunity (+111%)
- Vaccines cause miscarriages (+75%)

(Alba, 2021, para. 5)

The context of Delta misinformation was a social and political frame that created noise, as health PR struggled to warn people in the U.S. about the Omicron wave of highly infectious virus spreading during the holiday season. The Virality Project

that includes researchers from Stanford University tracked one Delta rumor collecting 142,000 Facebook likes and shares (Alba, 2021, para. 12). Unverified information frequently is shared on Facebook, and the platform added warning labels to all COVID-19 content. Still, Facebook's **CrowdTangle** data show millions of users reached by some false posts.

In Colorado the #PowerTheComeback campaign targeted "Latino, Black, Native American, Asian and other communities of color that historically have been underserved when it comes to healthcare and are the focus of agencies trying to raise vaccination rates" (Anderson, 2021, para. 3).

"We'll be waiting for you at 9 a.m. We hope this vaccination [J]ordan is a success. Here I see them." The officer was in a photo with a small boy standing in front of his police car in Commerce City, Colorado.

Organizers asked Carlos Cornejo (@sergeantcornejo), a police sergeant, to reach out to his 650,000 Facebook followers with messages encouraging those who had not taken the vaccine:

Cornejo, 32, is one of dozens of influencers, ranging from busy moms and fashion bloggers to African refugee advocates and religious leaders, getting paid by the state to post vaccine information on a local level in hopes of stunting a troubling summer surge of COVID-19.

(Anderson, 2021, para. 2)

Cornejo saw "rumors like police were arresting people without a mask" or "people get magnetized when they're vaccinated" (Anderson, 2021, para. 7). His posts were designed to reduce fear through factual information. The Colorado program paid Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and other influencers as much as \$1,000 per month to fight misinformation. Researchers were attempting to connect exposure to **facts** and the decision to take a vaccine shot. When people trust a source, then they are more likely to consider information that conflicts with their existing views.

Social media communication methods should be grounded in concepts, models and theories. A conceptual map can be used as an exploratory and heuristic tool to raise new questions about social media and political communication.

We can assume that social media communication exists within a broad social, political, regulatory and economic context. There are forces at work, such as entrepreneurial **innovation**, that retain a context of dynamism within the system. In fact, politician and **entrepreneur interaction** frequently happens within a context of power and money. Increasingly, social media data are a commodity of importance to social actors. We could measure the changes that allow for greater or lesser data control and privacy. Digital disruption, however, makes this

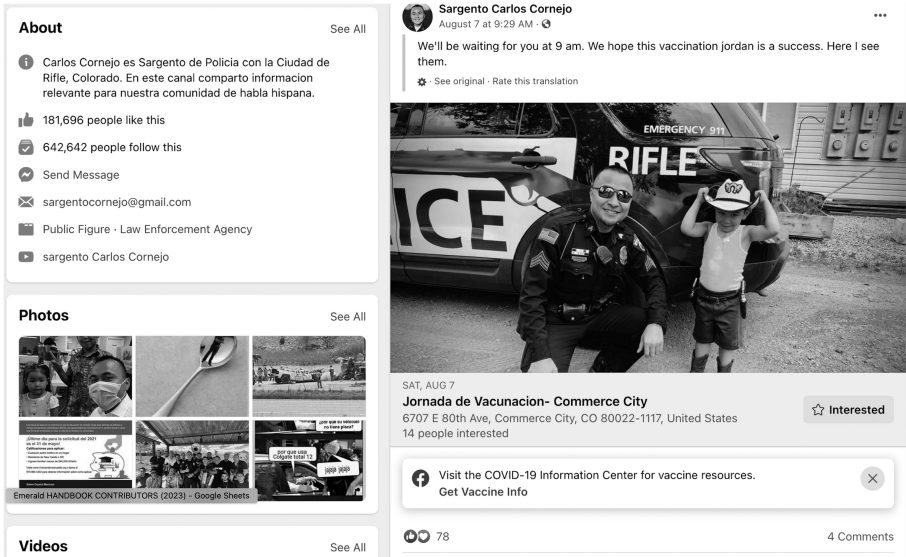


FIGURE 3.5 *Colorado Police Officer Uses Social Influence.* Source: Facebook public post of Sargento Carlos Cornejo

a challenging research goal. Web 3, for example, introduces **blockchain** security at the same time that it opens further shared data access and security concerns.

Social media communication introduced the power of algorithms to filter and order content within news feeds. Meta Facebook created new fluid technological change by investing in virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies that blur the boundaries between the physical and digital worlds. The diffusion of new ideas and practices may be unpredictable based upon user utility, uses and needs. At the same time, capitalism may exercise power by backing **startups**, and this remains important. Business and political powers may wield social influence and social capital as a form of trusted communication. Within this context, political candidates back issues and leverage available source and message credibility.

Traditional “legacy” news media, as well as social media, help promote opinion leaders of social and technological change. Journalists and entertainment celebrities utilize news media and the mass culture industry to broaden message reach and raise awareness about change. To the extent that media communication industries also promote the status quo, bloggers and podcasters have more freedom to explore social and technological change. The media communication inputs flow as content shared within online communities, social networks and

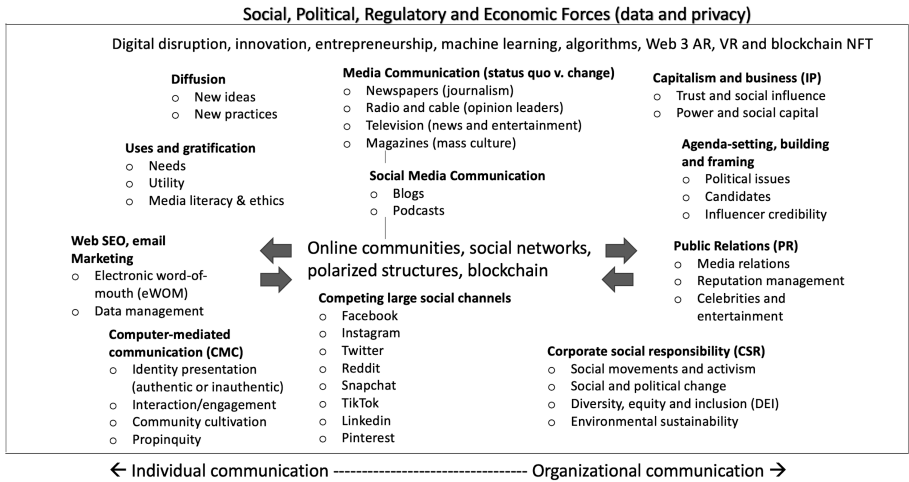


FIGURE 3.6 *Social Media and Political Communication Concept Map*. Source: Jeremy Harris Lipschultz

structures. Polarized political crowds form, grow and dissipate because sources and content change over time.

The spread of conspiracy theories has been challenging to measure and fully understand – especially following the January 6, 2021 assault on the U.S. Capitol:

Yet the hoaxes, conspiracy theories and attempts to rewrite history persist, muddying the public's understanding of what actually occurred during the most sustained attack on the seat of American democracy since the War of 1812...

...Spread by politicians, broadcast by cable news pundits and amplified by social media, the falsehoods are a stark reminder of how many Americans may no longer trust their own institutions or their own eyes.

(Klepper, 2022, paras 2, 4)

One of the challenges to fact came from Fox television host Tucker Carlson who suggested that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) was behind the riot. The spread of conspiracy theories by news gatekeepers and opinion leaders must be considered within the exploration of social media influence. Researchers may observe and measure conspiracy as a form of social media content.

This heuristic model proposes an information flow within social networks that should represent a tension between managed public relations (PR) content,

including celebrities and their entertainment, and **electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM)** social marketing that utilizes precise targeting through available data. The social media platforms function as competing channels where PR may exercise corporate social responsibility (CSR) through support for social movements, activism and social change. Diversity, **equity**, accessibility and inclusion (DEAI) is one such social change that has been promoted by large organizations.

Individuals also function as social and political actors through authentic or inauthentic identity presentation within computer-mediated communication (CMC). Their interaction or engagement may or may not help cultivate online communities. Individual power, in this view, is limited when not exercised through organizational power. Blockchain technology may be one approach as:

An ever-growing ***distributed*** list of records...
Arrived at and assembled by **consensus**...
That are grouped into **blocks**...
Which are **chained** sequentially (time-stamped)...
And interdependent (linked to the previous block)...
Therefore **immutable**.

(Gomes, 2019, 7:20)

At the heart of blockchain is the concept of the “decentralized autonomous organization” (DAO) that unleashes the power of an online group (Kirstel, 2021, para. 2). The model uses “...a set of rules facilitated by token systems and smart contracts to function” (Kirstel, 2021, para. 5). NFT contracts have been popularized as a blockchain application that may allow content creators to license and sell work. Within these transactions, influence or celebrity status may matter in convincing others to join. Celebrity status, such as becoming an Instagram influencer, enables individuals to obtain reputation management through large PR agencies. Celebrities leverage their power by collaborating with other celebrities across politics, entertainment, sports and other visible public spaces. As blockchain proliferates, it will create new popular online spaces to be studied by researchers.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How important are journalists' social media sharing compared to your friends and family? Why do you make judgments about news content frames and source credibility?

2. How, if at all, do you guard your data privacy? What personal or social value can be found within data privacy?
3. How can individuals use CMC to challenge social media power of celebrities, large organizations, corporations and political actors? How do social and technological change disrupt the political communication status quo?

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Developing Meaningful Political Communication Questions

“Facebook clarifies that its verification tick is not that – it’s a marker of notable accounts based on specific criteria”

Andrew Hutchinson (@adhutchinson), Head of Content and Social Media, *Social Media Today* (2021, September 2)

The use of blue check marks and other signals by Twitter, Facebook and other social media companies to show verified accounts has been problematic from the start. For more than a decade, there was a lack of clarity about how applications for verification were accepted, rejected or left in limbo. Facebook calls verified accounts “authentic and notable,” but “badges aren’t an endorsement from us” or “symbol of importance” (Hutchinson, 2021, para. 3). However, site users may indeed see it that way. It is likely that popularity is magnified by use of a badge. Facebook clarified that a badge on an account that is a “real person, registered business or entity,” has a “unique presence,” includes a public bio, photo and post, and “must represent a well-known, highly searched-for” person or brand (Hutchinson, 2021, paras 7–11). It is not clear whether or not Facebook has gone beyond national and international popularity to consider people active within a local community or market.

However, elected officials appear to have an edge in obtaining badges on Facebook and Twitter. This fact creates an obvious incumbency advantage on social media channels within the early stages of an electoral process. It also may favor celebrities who already have a badge in their efforts to run for office. Clearly, any account with a large number of followers may reach them with pre-campaign priming content.

DISINFORMATION AND POLITICAL ISSUES

Social media communication made it too easy to spread rumors, misinformation and disinformation that had the potential to sway political behaviors. Seven years before the pandemic, for example, a high school football player died of a heart attack from “an undiagnosed heart condition” (Fichera & Tulp, 2021, para. 2). A “widely shared” video, though, blamed his death on a COVID-19 vaccine instead of the common cause of an athlete with a heart defect (Fichera & Tulp, 2021, para. 1). The deceptive false video spread a narrative about unfounded risks: “The clips inundate viewers with a barrage of stories and headlines delivered without context, some translated from other languages and offering few details people can check on their own” (Fichera & Tulp, 2021, para. 4). The disinformation tactics appeared to be designed to circumvent **media literacy** critical thinking skills in a way that mimics classic propaganda. For people who struggled with the decision to take a vaccine, narrative videos may raise doubts about safety. The extended global pandemic had the potential to destabilize governments over a stressed healthcare system, economic decline and ongoing political polarization between those who trusted vaccines and doubters. Health and safety have the potential to become political issues. In some cases, it is less about disinformation than ignoring emerging concerns with a variety of new issues, services or products.

As electronic cigarettes became popular, for example, one 19-month study of a subreddit community found a focus on quality, colors and price instead of potential health risks (Allem, et al., 2019). “Controlling the design features of e-cigarette products, for example standardizing size, color and wattage, to make them appeal to adult cigarette smokers attempting to quit, but not to youth or non-smokers, warrants consideration for future research and policies addressing e-cigarette use” (Allem, et al., 2019, p. 5). Clearly, manufacturers of products have a vested interest in promoting them on social media sites to increase sales. While e-cigarettes offered an alternative to smoking that is known to cause cancer, the technological innovation also could be a gateway for nonsmokers to adopt the habit. Any division between users and nonusers has the potential to create new political division and conflict. Divisive issues may be further politicized by candidates seeking news media attention through traditional campaign tactics that now include tweets and

other social media posts, such as TikTok or Instagram videos. The pressure to create viral content may lead political content to become more outrageous.

The use of political **memes** is one way to quickly attract attention through audience reach and engagement (Literat & van den Berg, 2017). A subreddit existed for meme traders to place value on viral content within a subculture that could further *gamify* politics. A narrative of surveillance capitalism may also pair product reviews, viral memes and use of online data (Zuboff, 2019). Social media content deconstruction may help identify design and targeting features, values, beliefs and motivation for messages, framing, persuasion and meaning-making as avenues for propaganda inoculation. Accuracy and fact verification is an essential political ingredient for digital navigation.

COVID-19 use and endorsement of hydroxychloroquine by Donald Trump was followed by an uptick in prescriptions, as “people sought out the drug based on trusting an opinion rather than a fact” (Crowder-Meyer & Ferrín, 2021, p. 754). A recent study of ideology and ethno-racial membership found possible factors in accepting opinions as fact. Social identity may be a predictor of political knowledge and behavior:

...Black and Hispanic respondents generally interpret statements to favor liberal and ethnoracial minority interests more often than whites, independently of ideology, while white respondents' positions on the two scales depend greatly on ideology.
(Crowder-Meyer & Ferrín, 2021, p. 772)

Crowder-Meyer and Ferrín (2021) also found that these factors interacted with party identification, but the “...data do not allow us to distinguish genuine misinformation from expressive responding” (Crowder-Meyer & Ferrín, 2021, p. 773). Misinformation and disinformation acceptance are challenging to study because social media communication techniques rapidly change over time. TikTok 15-second videos are one example in which creative fans and followers of candidates or office holders may be elevated to a paid social media influencer status.

POLITICAL STRUCTURES, POWER, INFLUENCE AND LEADERSHIP

Within social media communication, some research suggests that ideological division, or **echo chambers** may be less likely than expected (Barberá, et al., 2015). In a study of retweeting behavior, “...online communication structures are flexible and situation-specific, and ...aggregate level of political polarization depends heavily on the nature of the issue” (Barberá, et al., 2015, p. 1539). The election,

government shutdown and political speech retweets were more likely to resemble an echo chamber than the less political discussion of the Boston Marathon bombing and sports: “The popularization of social media as a means of communication within interpersonal networks is not inevitably bounded by ideological contours, especially when it comes to nonpolitical issues and events” (Barberá, et al., 2015, p. 1540). It makes sense that non-political social media communication would be less likely to reflect polarization – especially since five other Twitter structures consistently have been found (Smith et al., 2014).

Quantitative and qualitative social network analyses have the potential to uncover political online structures across a wide range of political issues – including those that help cultivate supportive communities and new social movements. As social media communication morphs into a greater degree of media richness found within face-to-face human communication, we would expect social presence that increases a sense of social trust and agency. As “technologies erase the distinction between the virtual and real worlds,” theorists have speculated about “both optimistic and pessimistic views of the future” (Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney, 1998, p. 57). The wielding power, cultural development, and the roles individuals play all remain fluid, as the Web 3 metaverse emerges within blockchain structures, owned NFTs and virtual political engagement.

BOUNDARIES AND POWER

In an age of social media communication, individuals are empowered with a global stage to reach others. For example, the r/HermanCainAward Reddit site focused on stories about people who “mocked COVID-19 vaccines before eventually dying from the disease” (Rodriguez, 2021, para. 1). It reportedly launched in September of 2020 and grew to more than 375,000 users (Rodriguez, 2021, para. 2). Rodriguez (2021), @SAL19, reported that:

Reddit users upload screenshots multiple times a day of people who previously posted anti-vaccine comments and content on Facebook only to end up getting sick with COVID-19 before dying. The name of the subreddit refers to former Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain, who died from COVID-19 in July 2020, after refusing to wear a mask and attending a Donald Trump re-election campaign event.

(Rodriguez, 2021, para. 10)

“The forum has been the 10th fastest-growing subreddit over the past 30 days, according to FrontPageMetrics.com, which tracks Reddit usage” (Rodriguez, 2021,

para. 12). Some subreddit users told CNBC that the site convinced them to go ahead with vaccination. In October of 2021, /r/antiwork surpassed Reddit growth of popular channels, such as /r/funny, /r/memes, /r/movies and others.

Social media communication platforms may have varying effects on users:

It can have a weakening effect on strong democratic regimes, an intensifying effect on strong authoritarian regimes, a radicalizing effect on weak democratic regimes, and a destabilizing effect on weak authoritarian regimes. There are a number of possible approaches U.S. policymakers can take to decrease the effects of social media platforms and to guarantee citizens the right to freedom of opinion based on reliable, pluralistic, and objectively sourced information.

(Schleffer & Miller, 2021, para. 1)

“Destabilization” may be found “in weak authoritarian regimes when social media platforms facilitate the coordination and mobilization of dissidents and grass-roots movements (which represent domestic opposition) in resisting the government’s tyranny” (Schleffer & Miller, 2021, para. 30). In other words, social media communication may be used as a tool for the exercise of political power. Platform algorithms help foster filter bubbles — spaces where false information quickly spreads within echo chambers. It is unclear how effective official government information may be within social and political contexts that lack fundamental trust amid “information cascades” that may be viewed with suspicion by supporters and opponents of salient political issues (Schleffer & Miller, 2021, para. 94). Few social media users appear to show an interest in engaging in political or social issues:

Roughly a fifth of those who never or rarely post about these issues say that among major reasons for this are not having anything to add to the conversation, not paying close attention to political or social issues, or not wanting to offend others.

(McClain, 2021, 2021, para. 3)

Pew Research Center survey respondents said they never or rarely post (70 percent) about political and social issues because they fear the engagement will be used against them (33 percent). They also do not want to risk being attacked by trolls (33 percent). Nearly as commonly, users say they have nothing to add or are not paying attention. People also tend to avoid conflict.

While social media sites may contribute to audience fragmentation, particularly during a polarizing political campaign, attention may be limited to a few

salient issues (Bleier, Lietz & Strohmaier, 2018). Candidates attempt to influence likely voters, increase voter turnout by raising interest, and raise awareness about their issues and events. A general election typically comes down to a voter decision between two choices. The more someone spends time on social media sites compared to traditional news media or other sources of personal influence, the more likely it is that social conversation will have an effect on personal political agenda-setting.

Box 4.1: Facebook’s Power

Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg wields power over the most expansive global social networks and their billions of daily users. The massive growth of the corporation brought with it money to spread around within the political system. Facebook has vested interests, such as the desire to avoid burdensome government regulation. Beginning with the global pandemic in 2020, Zuckerberg also spent \$400 million in political and candidate donations, but Republican state legislatures responded with bans on private funding: “The legislation often comes as part of Republican packages that also put new limits on how voters can cast ballots and impose new requirements on county or city-based election officials” (Riccardi, 2021, para. 3):

The response is spurred by anger and suspicion on the right that Zuckerberg’s money benefited Democrats in 2020. Conservatives have long accused the tech mogul’s social media platform of censoring right-wing voices as part of its campaign against misinformation.

(Riccardi, 2021, para. 4)

Republicans claimed that Zuckerberg’s money had flowed to battleground presidential election states in “Democrat-leaning counties” (Riccardi, 2021, para. 5). However, Democrats responded that Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan’s grants were fairly distributed. Much of the money was distributed by the Center for Tech and Civic Life. It claimed every application was funded for 2,500 offices across the nation. Many election officials defended the grants as a nonpartisan effort. At the

same time, some election officials have said that state funding of their offices has been insufficient.

The broader election system is another issue. Large urban areas, such as Milwaukee, Wisconsin have been plagued by long voting lines. During recent elections, influence about the narratives surrounding voting have been shared across social networks by celebrities and other opinion leaders on the political left and right. U.S. Supreme Court decisions also opened the door to large amounts of private funding for campaigns through political action committees (PACs), as an exercise of First Amendment rights. The role of big money within U.S. elections has been documented and considered one way to subvert democracy through spending on advertising, paid social media, and other tactics.

Celebrity communication – organic and paid advertising – continues to be influential within political social media communication. Campaign social influence depends upon how much voters embrace the status quo or seek change. Activism through social movements typically is driven by change agents. Sometimes change is advocated for fundamental power shifts, such as was found with the #MeToo and #NotOkay tweets that demand gender equity and accountability. Other times, a candidate advocates for a concrete change, such as when Bernie Sanders repeated the need for a \$15 per hour minimum wage in the United States. Specific conflicts – wars, school shootings and other events – may amplify social media conflict over political policies that are reported during 24-hour news cycles.

SOCIAL CONFLICT AND THE NEWS

Social conflict within news appears to vary across channels and nations (Cohen, Adoni & Bantz, 1990). Local news, for example, was found to be full of dramatic and live crime stories (Lipschultz & Hilt, 2002). Breaking news events may be deemed newsworthy because of cultural or social “rules” that also may be impacted by geography or “time frame” (Lipschultz & Hilt, 2002, p. 29). A “fear of crime,” for example, may be related to a sense of psychological “helplessness” (Lipschultz & Hilt, 2002, p. 137). It is easy to see how these potential media effects may transfer to social media engagement and spread of news and information by political trolls.

Within a social media communication context, audience attention and engagement appear to be important concerns. For example, polarized social networks can be found within Twitter, and these may grow because of the spread of negative tweets (Bellovary, Young, & Goldenberg, 2021). While social media generally appear to be more positive, the research found that news organizations often use “emotional language,” as “it is likely that the same negative language that they express outside of social media is used on these platforms to lure users to the news outlets’ websites” (Bellovary, Young, & Goldenberg, 2021, p. 4). So-called “moral emotional language” appears to be common among liberal and conservative social networks, that may be promoting the spread of content and “driving engagement on social media within negative contexts” (Bellovary, Young, & Goldenberg, 2021, p. 4). The spread of negative news has led to a “digital emotion contagion” prediction: “...it is possible that negativity on social media manifests itself in the mood of users,” and “it is possible that a high frequency of negative news may spread negative mood through the Twitter network” (Bellovary, Young, & Goldenberg, 2021, p. 12). The analysis of more than 140,000 tweets from 44 news organizations in 2020 suggested that negative content was slightly more likely than positive, and this led to increased engagement (Senz, 2021). The old local television news norm of, “If it bleeds, it leads” may have been adopted by news organizations utilizing Twitter: “Although people produce much more positive content on social media in general, negative content is much more likely to spread,” (Senz, 2021, paras 2, 4). Digital emotion contagion is a construct that may be related to broader concerns about diffusion of social conflict and out-group animosity within the news and social media communication (Goldenberg & Gross, 2020; Rathje, Van Bavel, & van der Linden, 2021). An emotional contagion has been suggested to include “mimicry,” “category activation, in which exposure to emotional expressions primes an emotion category,” or “social appraisal” (Rathje, Van Bavel, & van der Linden, 2021, p. 5). It is not known how much media richness of mediated content, such as Internet memes, is similar to how the spread of emotion happens within face-to-face social settings.

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

The sociology of personal influence was rooted in the study of small communities (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The flow of information within a “persuasion process” treats individuals “as intervening factors between the stimuli of media and resultant opinions, decisions and actions” (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, pp. 32–33). People also may be viewed as “interacting individuals” sharing “influence” and

adopting “the thinking habits” of a group (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, p. 49). Groups may offer:

- Benefits of conformity
- Social reality that offers meanings
- Attraction of shared values

(Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, pp. 50–59)

These motivations may function within a social network and amplify messages to others. In such cases, we would expect further growth of the idea through engagement. This could lead to the rise of a political or social movement – particularly when reinforcing beliefs within “friendship networks” or those found “within the web of shared interests and concerns” (p. 95).

Box 4.2: Thought Leader: Rhiannon B. Kallis

Social Media: Where Pseudo-Relationships with Politicians Feel Genuine

“Which presidential candidate can you imagine having a drink with?” Serious or not, the answer to this type of question is recognized in American popular culture as being seemingly indicative of political attitudes and voting behaviors. Imagining which candidate (whom voters have likely never met in-person) one would most enjoy company with seems like a preposterous idea. However, people are constantly making judgments about celebrities and politicians, whom they have never met, as if they know them in-person.

At the root of the initial question is perceived similarity and connection with a candidate – constructs which can be explained through the principles of parasocial interactions. Social media give users the illusion of acquaintanceship or friendship and may nowadays be the start of pseudo-relationships voters form with politicians. Ultimately, the nature of using social media can help voters form opinions that answer the original question, “Which presidential candidate can you imagine having a drink with?” The problem lies in the illusion of friendship and the potential faulty decision making that can come along with building that



FIGURE 4.1 *Rhiannon B. Kallis, University of Akron. Courtesy Rhiannon B. Kallis, University of Akron School of Communication; Photography by John R. Kallis*

kind of trust in someone based solely on perceptions of that person – not actual interactions.

Instagram Live and TikTok Videos: The New Fireside Chat

Before speaking into a smartphone to address thousands of followers online, politicians used the radio airwaves to build relationships with potential voters. In the 1930s Roosevelt’s Fireside chats were an unprecedented avenue of connecting the President to the American people. When introducing Roosevelt’s chats, the announcer said, “The President wants to come into your home and sit at your fireside for a little fireside chat” (Biser, 2016).

Almost 100 years later, politicians are still asking to enter Americans’ homes, but this time through smartphones and laptops instead of radio

TABLE 4.1 Subreddit Forum Data

Today		7 days		30 days	
/r/announcements	+133,968	/r/announcements	+875,559	/r/announcements	+3,276,678
/r/antiwork	+40,853	/r/antiwork	+97,535	/r/funny	+279,052
/r/funny	+10,465	/r/funny	+75,116	/r/AskReddit	+244,568
/r/memes	+10,197	/r/memes	+68,160	/r/memes	+235,168
/r/movies	+7,795	/r/AskReddit	+58,518	/r/HolUp	+193,609
/r/poland	+7,195	/r/HolUp	+57,287	/r/gaming	+182,704
/r/AskReddit	+6,940	/r/Damnthatinteresting	+51,577	/r/movies	+180,848
/r/gaming	+6,615	/r/movies	+51,433	/r/newworldgame	+179,321
/r/Vilnius	+6,594	/r/gaming	+50,813	/r/Damnthatinteresting	+167,892
/r/Jokes	+6,460	/r/wholesomememes	+48,819	/r/nextfuckinglevel	+166,270
/r/nottheonion	+6,045	/r/Jokes	+44,490	/r/antiwork	+165,114
/r/SuperStraight	+5,890	/r/nextfuckinglevel	+42,473	/r/MadeMeSmile	+162,932
/r/Showerthoughts	+5,727	/r/nottheonion	+42,130	/r/aww	+159,826
/r/Minecraft	+5,466	/r/Showerthoughts	+41,316	/r/Unexpected	+157,856
/r/DIY	+5,415	/r/NatureIsFuckingLit	+40,265	/r/Jokes	+154,656
/r/Music	+5,331	/r/MadeMeSmile	+37,485	/r/nottheonion	+150,302
/r/MadeMeSmile	+5,295	/r/DIY	+36,452	/r/Showerthoughts	+148,388
/r/Unexpected	+5,198	/r/Music	+36,436	/r/Music	+143,674
/r/buildapc	+5,088	/r/Documentaries	+36,162	/r/todayilearned	+141,178
/r/Documentaries	+5,061	/r/BeAmazed	+36,115	/r/worldnews	+139,156
/r/dataisbeautiful	+5,020	/r/todayilearned	+35,841	/r/wholesomememes	+137,408
/r/todayilearned	+4,914	/r/aww	+35,635	/r/HermanCainAward	+137,293
/r/worldnews	+4,812	/r/newworldgame	+35,385	/r/Documentaries	+134,593
/r/lifehacks	+4,715	/r/worldnews	+34,382	/r/NatureIsFuckingLit	+133,889
/r/HistoryMemes	+4,586	/r/Unexpected	+34,071	/r/DIY	+128,920
/r/aww	+4,523	/r/CryptoMoonShots	+33,439	/r/CryptoCurrency	+128,674
/r/Damnthatinteresting	+4,441	/r/CryptoCurrency	+32,883	/r/pics	+128,446
/r/HumansBeingBros	+4,395	/r/HistoryMemes	+32,862	/r/GabbyPetito	+122,601
/r/CryptoCurrency	+4,332	/r/buildapc	+31,798	/r/AnimalsBeingDerps	+114,555
/r/anime	+4,292	/r/lifehacks	+31,501	/r/space	+114,374

Source: Front Page Metrics (2021, October 16). Fastest growing: /r/antiwork. FrontPageMetrics.com. <http://frontpagemetrics.com/>.

airwaves. Social network sites have opened a new way of connecting that builds upon the level of perceived personable communication available from other mass media, such as radio and television. Popular social network site Twitter launched in 2006 (History, 2021) during the George W. Bush administration, but it took nearly a decade for the White House to be involved officially on Twitter. Before President Trump's famous "Covfefe" was published (see Estepa, 2018) it all started with this inaugural presidential tweet on May 15, 2015 by Barack Obama: "Hello, Twitter! It's Barack. Really! Six years in, they're finally giving me my own account" (@POTUS44) (Wall, 2015). After the official social media appearance for the President was established, opportunities grew for other politicians to create a presence on Twitter and other social networking apps through verified accounts. United States representative, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (@AOC), is known to famously use a sharp tongue over Twitter and Instagram while other politicians are split on whether to have a presence on short form video-sharing platform, TikTok.

Presidents Trump and Biden both chose not to create TikTok accounts due to privacy concerns (Perrett, 2020), but other politicians have made their way to the popular video-sharing app. Massachusetts Senator, Ed Markey, incorporates TikTok into his communication initiatives and has published 44 short-form videos, gained 43.5K followers, and received over 584,000 likes. Reaching new voters through this app has huge potential as roughly 41% of TikTok users are ages 16 to 24 years (Tok the Vote, 2020; Cohen, 2020).

These newer channels of communication not only allow for the flow of information but for potential growth in relationship building with constituents.

"I feel like I know them": Forming Pseudo-relationships with Politicians

When using phrases such as, "He seems like such a nice person," or "I bet she would be fun to hang out with," about a celebrity someone has never met, they are unknowingly describing parasocial interactions or

parasocial relationships. While these types of feelings are standard to experience (Cohen & Holbert, 2018), the terminology – parasocial interactions – is not yet a household phrase.

Parasocial interactions were defined by Horton and Wohl in the 1950s to describe the connections people form with media figures. The key factor that distinguishes them from other relationships is the one-sided nature. Plainly said, people feel as though they know celebrities like a friend.

While parasocial interactions were originally explored and applied to traditional media, such as radio and television (Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985; Rubin & McHugh, 1987; Turner, 1993; Hofstetter & Gianos, 1997), they can also extend to celebrity and fan relationships built on social network sites (Stever & Lawson, 2013; Baek, Bae, & Jang, 2013; Kim & Song, 2016; de Bérail, Guillon, & Bungener, 2019).

Prior to social media, fans could discover information about famous people through magazines, television specials and radio interviews. Currently, social media give users the opportunity to potentially engage in two-way interaction with their favorite celebrity. Aspects of social media such as “interactivity, immediacy, and an intimate communication style” are contributing to the ability for social media users to undergo strong connections with celebrities while online (Chung and Cho, 2017, p. 489). Traditional media platforms once made it difficult to engage in two-way interactions, but social media now allow for two-way communication with celebrities and politicians through social media messaging capabilities. For example, a fan might receive a retweet from a celebrity, a “follow” on Twitter, or a direct message on Instagram, making these platforms ideal environments to foster parasocial relationships.

Not only can well-known politicians connect on a personal level via social media to their target audiences, but new political candidates can foster relationships through these channels. “New candidates can humanize themselves through their social media accounts, and that helps voters feel more connected to them” (*Wharton Business Daily*, 2020, para. 10). Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, and “largely personality-based” app TikTok

(Perrett, 2020, para. 51) are all outlets that allow for depth and breadth of connections. Although politicians drive their political agenda through their social media, they touch on a breadth of topics when posting.

2020 Presidential candidate, Pete Buttigieg dedicated much of his Twitter page to spreading information about voting, policies, and other politically charged subjects. But Pete Buttigieg (@PeteButtigieg) also shared more personal topics that showcased him in relatable manner. Buttigieg shared a photo of his adopted shelter dog, Buddy, on Twitter which garnered such replies as: "Ok you've got my vote" (@beckyjo17) and "We need a president who encourages people to adopt shelter dogs. I am all in Mayor Pete" (@ourfitz).

These types of responses are not uncommon, as social media platforms lend themselves to building personal relationships. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (AOC) is known for her vulnerability, transparency, and passion delivering information – both political and personal – through her social network channels. While discussing the invasion of the Capitol building, which broadcast over Instagram live, AOC emotionally recalled the event and also shared very personal information about sexual assault (Framke, 2021). Popular press deemed this moment a "confession not from a politician, but from a friend who'd been steeling herself to share this truth all along" (Framke, 2021, para. 2). AOC's approach to using her social network channels has been compared to FDR's fireside chats. She has been seen cooking macaroni and putting together furniture while talking about political topics (Framke, 2021), which allow Americans into her home and create a perceived understanding of AOC not only as a politician, but as a relatable person.

Another candid politician on social media is Senator Ed Markey. Some of Markey's TikTok videos show him playing basketball in which TikTok users have commented: "the ethical politician is ballin' ..." (gardenvarietysocialist) "KING" (mayashutup), and "ICON" (swagmoneyswagswag). Markey has piggybacked on popular TikTok effects, such as the clone squad, which is one of his highest viewed videos to date. He also recently posted a random, yet oddly relatable short video of rigatoni boiling in water which has over 15,000 views so far.

Back to reality: What does this all mean?

How does rigatoni in boiling water hold any significance to the political world? Voters assess candidates' competency and character, including goodwill and relational elements (Cohen & Holbert, 2018). Decisions can be made based on the influence of a parasocial relationship – we may believe and trust one person over the other because we feel as though we know and identify with one and do not with another. In an article titled "Parasocial relationships with President Trump as a predictor of COVID-19 information seeking," authors Kelly et al. (2020) warn of the implications of decision-making based on parasocial relationships. For example, when it comes to forming attitudes about health information (e.g. vaccinations), policies, and other politically charged subjects, Americans may turn to their parasocial source for direction rather than heed the advice of experts (Kelly et al., 2020).

For those experiencing parasocial relationships it is important to remain present in the experience. Although content on social media appears to be authentic and personable, there is strategy and selective self-presentation in order to achieve the perception of intimacy (Lee & Jang, 2011). When it is all said and done, parasocial relationships are exactly how they are described: *pseudo*-relationships that give us the *illusion* of connection.

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CASE STUDY: ANTI-VAX INFLUENCE

The political and social conflict over coronavirus vaccines was impacted by misinformation and disinformation. For example, Jasmine Clifford (@antivaxmomma) was among 15 social media influencers charged with conspiring to sell fake vaccination cards (Dickson, 2021a). The woman from New Jersey had been popular on

Instagram. At the same time, some TikTok videos promoted the use of a deworming medicine for horses, Ivermectin, as a COVID-19 cure (Dickson, 2021b). It was clear that social media site attempts to filter dangerous messages had failed to stop the evolving pandemic spread of malinformation. While some were motivated to gain political power, frequently disinformation campaigns are designed to put money in the hands of promoters. Throughout the rise of fake political news and information, there has been a pattern of profiteering from the sharing of bogus posts. It is obvious that some members of social media audiences are susceptible to false news, information and advertising. However, government regulation designed to protect health and safety has been slow to keep pace with rapidly changing knowledge about the pandemic. Political campaigns on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, may offer mediated channels for the engagement of politicians with voters, or exploit a conduit for misinformation, malinformation or disinformation (Bleier, Lietz, & Strohmaier, 2018).

Entertainment media also may feature political information that ranges from fact to fiction. In a recent experimental setting, there was a statistically significant relationship found between the use of “suspense” and an “empathy” effect (Knobloch-Westerwick, et al., 2021, p. 1096). “Interestingly the results demonstrate that merely reading a short text with a clear stance about a political issue affected political attitudes” (Knobloch-Westerwick, et al., 2021, p. 1097). It appears that audiences respond to low-credibility sources for political information – especially when messages reinforce an existing belief.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you know who and what to trust when seeing posts about the global pandemic?
2. What forces of political power may be at work within the pro and anti-vaccine movements? How do their messages potentially create confusion?
3. What are some possible solutions to improve political communication in an age of social media communication?

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Academic and Industry Social Media Data

“Social media can pose substantial challenges for established media outlets”

(Wu & Garrison, 2021 p. 132)

Academic studies about the impact of social media disruption on newsrooms includes modeling about relationships between “social media friendly innovation,” Twitter and Facebook “engagement” and “attitude toward social media innovations” (Wu & Garrison, 2021, p. 134). Online survey data found that journalists at publicly-owned media had a more positive view about social media. Academic and industry data are useful in understanding how social and technological change may impact political journalism and flow of political news and information across social channels.

For more than a decade, academic researchers have focused on how social media application programming interfaces (APIs) are an important source of user data (Lomborg & Bechmann, 2012). Third-party software developers require access to user data, and some academic researchers used the back door to study social media before the Facebook Cambridge Analytica scandal. Following that misuse of user data, Facebook tightened its access. However, academics continued to mine data from Twitter, which always was a more public site. From the start, social science

research based upon secondary analyses of social media site data suffered from reliability and **validity** concerns due to a lack of transparency within the for-profit corporation. Additionally, there were ethical concerns because data collection and analysis often happened without informed consent by site users. In recent years, academics have attempted to critically examine research methodologies for collecting and analyzing social media data (Parekh, et al., 2018). In the use of Twitter to study terrorists, for example, social graph interaction may be important, but it is not always possible to know “what ‘counts’ as a relationship” (Parekh, et al., 2018, p. 6). Additionally, data sampling methodologies vary.

Social media measurement of **metrics** and management includes the use of quantitative and qualitative data. Platforms, such as Meta Facebook and Instagram, offer page use insight data that include the effectiveness of top posts (Lipschultz, 2020). Political campaigns seek to optimize organic and paid or **promoted posts** on social media channels. The attributes of content with the broadest reach and engagement may be further managed through precise targeting of demographic, psychographic and geographic groups. Facebook was forced to turn off targeting during campaigns because of the dangers in exploiting these powerful techniques. Facebook began to turn away from advertisement targeting in order to compete with the highly-tuned TikTok algorithm that delivers precisely targeted content based upon interests rather than demographic data. Facial recognition also is being used to identify sources of social media influence.

Campaign managers, however, still have an ability to strategically use specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely SMART objectives: “When setting objectives for a social media strategy, don’t make the mistake of focusing on smaller social media activity such as ‘likes’ or comments – sometimes called vanity metrics” (Quesenberry, 2021, p. 92). In a sense, political campaigns run on social media channels’ promise a “value proposition” about a candidate that tells voters what she, he or they “stand for,” as well as “why it deserves” a vote (Quesenberry, 2021, p. 94).

Twitter Analytics and TweetDeck are also free tools that can be used to explore data to maximize effectiveness. Beyond a political campaign, any social media advocate or influencer has the ability to use strategies and tactics to improve message effectiveness. Evaluation of any social or other media content may follow influence (tone), message, prominence, audience (reach), consultant (spokesperson quote) and type (I.M.P.A.C.T) (Luttrell & Capizzo, 2019, p. 169). In general, content should follow a planning model for research, objectives, strategies, tactics, implementation and reporting (ROSTIR) to offer a path to engage across paid, earned, shared and **owned** (PESO) media channels (Luttrell & Capizzo, 2019, p. 19). Social media interaction and engagement on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter,

TikTok and other popular channels are a dominant political campaign method for sharing content.

As social media communication continues to develop, perhaps with the integration of blockchain technologies, data privacy will need to be emphasized. U.S. states and the European Union were among government leaders in demanding a greater degree of transparency about how data are used. Traditionally, political campaign data have been proprietary in seeking a competitive advantage. Instagram has begun to shift away from public post metrics, and this allows campaigns to limit what opponents know about audience reach and engagement. Surveys, focus groups and other traditional research approaches could be utilized without regulatory intrusion into methods. The online world is different in that regulators increasingly have an interest in advertising transparency.

Survey researchers, for example, may buy subjects hired through Amazon Mechanical Turk. It essentially crowdsources for human information tasks (HITS), such as research participants. It has been an inexpensive approach to data collection. Academics using Mechanical Turk must follow Institutional Review Board (IRB) human subjects' research protocols before recruiting paid respondents. For academic and political campaign researchers, of course, research **ethics** should be a primary consideration. Industry researchers are paid for data quality and results. Increasingly, they also are expected to protect social media data privacy, value outcomes and aggregate quantitative and qualitative findings for campaigns or social movements. At the same, organizations track their industries through survey research and other methods. Journalists have reported on campaign successes and failures, but newsroom layoffs limit resources for investigative reporting.

Box 5.1 Successful U.S. Newsrooms Pivoted Toward Digital and Social Media

A steep decline in the size of newsrooms since 2008 has impacted the quantity and quality of political journalism within the United States. While the newspaper decline can be traced to a banking crisis in 2008 and 2009, newspaper and broadcast newsrooms also were impacted by Internet and social media site advertising. Sites such as Craig's List were a lower-priced alternative to newspaper display and other media advertising options. Additionally, real estate agencies, automobile dealerships

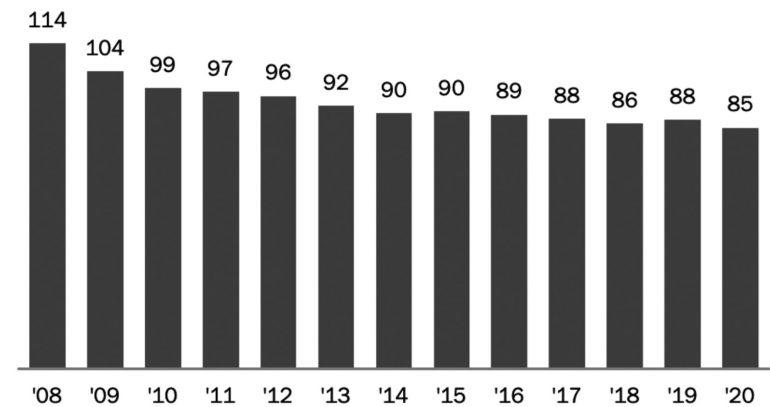
and other local businesses launched functional websites and social media pages that allowed them to directly reach consumers. Revenue losses inevitably led to budget cuts. Large newspapers, for example, reduced specialized reporting sections and editors. Pew Research (2021) has been tracking the impact upon newsroom employment.

Walker (2021) noted that newspaper “steep job losses,” though, have been offset by “considerable gains” in journalism employment

Newsroom employment in the United States declined 26% between 2008 and 2020

Newsroom employment in the United States declined 26% between 2008 and 2020

Number of U.S. newsroom employees in news industries, in thousands



Note: The OEWS survey is designed to produce estimates by combining data collected over a three-year period. Newsroom employees include news analysts, reporters and journalists; editors; photographers; and television, video and film camera operators and editors. News industries include newspaper publishers; radio broadcasting; television broadcasting; cable and other subscription programming; and other information services, the best match for digital-native news publishers.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics data.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

FIGURE 5.1 *Declining U.S. Newsroom Size. Courtesy Pew Research Center (2021)*

at “digital-native news organizations” (Walker, 2021, para. 1). The Pew Research Center analyzed U.S. bureau of Labor Statistics data that had not yet fully addressed the impact that followed from the global pandemic.

There were about 114,000 total newsroom employees in 2008, but that number declined to 85,000 by 2020 (Walker, 2021, para. 2). More than one-third of all newsroom employees now are working within television, as the industry was less impacted by layoffs than newspapers (Walker, 2021, paras 6–7). The data do not tell a complete story. A shift from newspapers to broadcast news and social media suggest that there is much less political reporting, and less interest in state legislatures where new laws have been passed amid an ineffective U.S. Congress on key issues.

The emergence of TikTok and other video sites during the pandemic was sparked by, for example, healthcare workers directly telling their stories about overwhelmed emergency rooms, lack of equipment and supplies and troubling chaotic conditions. Such personal media **story-telling** with a lack of news media gatekeeping made it easier to also spread political misinformation and disinformation.

Papper (2021a) found that U.S. local television newsroom staffing, contrary to conventional wisdom, grew – in part because of new media roles:

Local TV news added 500 jobs during 2020, making up for about 300 lost the previous year. The 1.8% increase brought total full-time local TV news employment to 28,000, just over 2009’s previous high.

(Papper, 2021a, para. 2)

Three-fourths of new hires were solo journalists (called “MMJs”), producers and digital roles, such as social media managers. Surviving traditional media companies use social media communication, live streaming and other innovative and entrepreneurial shifts:

...There’s no question that stations have thrown more and more resources at the digital and social media side of the operation. I wouldn’t say that stations

have necessarily “embraced” social media. Stations have learned that the more they do with social media, the richer Facebook gets. That’s part of why stations **are** embracing streaming via OTT and NextGen TV (ATSC 3.0) and attempting to redirect people from FB or Twitter to their own website. Stations still get most of their revenue (directly or indirectly via retransmission) based on the broadcast product, but as the audience watches more and more video via streaming, stations are determined to be there.

(Papper, 2021b, para. 1)

RTNDA added political communication survey questions for its 2022 survey, and it will be interesting to pair newsroom responses with future social media communication.

While the radio and television broadcasting industry has attempted to track staff size, average salaries and audience size through ratings, the emerging confluence of advertising, marketing and public relations online data measurement and management generated a host of concerns. The industry sought a guiding light about how to use, for example, social media data.

THE BARCELONA 3.0 PRINCIPLES

For a quarter of a century, the International Association for the Measurement and Evaluation of Communication has focused on industry principles that guide use of data (AMEC, 2022). The **Barcelona Principles 3.0** reflect the view that advertising, marketing and public relations professionals need to use industry data that are reliable and valid. An industry consensus emerged a decade ago and has twice been revised to apply to government and **nongovernmental organization (NGO)** data use. The seven principles include:

1. **Setting goals is an absolute prerequisite to communications planning, measurement, and evaluation.** Specific, measurable, actionable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART) goals are a foundation and “*essential prerequisite*.”
2. **Measurement and evaluation should identify outputs, outcomes, and potential impact.** Longer term impact should be achieved “through campaigns, events and activations.”

3. **Outcomes and impact should be identified for stakeholders, society, and the organization.** This should be applied to a broad range of organizations, including non-profits.
4. **Communication measurement and evaluation should include both qualitative and quantitative analysis.** Interpretation of data may lead to understanding communication.
5. **AVEs are not the value of communication.** Advertising value equivalencies (AVEs) frequently are sought as evidence of public relations effectiveness, but these data are not reliable or valid.
6. **Holistic communication measurement and evaluation includes all relevant online and offline channels.** The principles should be applied to social media measurement: "The AMEC measurement framework promotes clarity across earned, owned, shared, and paid channels to ensure consistency in approach towards a common goal."
7. **Communication measurement and evaluation are rooted in integrity and transparency to drive learning and insights.** GDPR data privacy is an important component of transparent integrity within business use of online data.
(AMEC, 2022, paras 1–7)

Dramatic social media communication research findings should be evaluated based upon theoretic and methodological rigor. This includes social media data exploring thought leadership effectiveness, social media marketing **paid search** behavioral outcomes, media relations, campaign management, influence of bloggers and engaged journalists, **crowdsourcing** and **crowdfunding** efforts. Former journalists have sometimes created a **blog** as a way to distribute content, and they may slowly adopt new methods based upon marketing best practices.

The future of campaign management must include an assessment of artificial intelligence (AI) tools that may use natural language processes (NLPs), **chatbot** website and telephone tools, secret social media site algorithms that drive newsfeeds, existence of deepfakes video within the political public sphere, as well as the inner-working of social media companies that have become **gatekeepers** of political news and information.

CASE STUDY: THE FACEBOOK FILES

Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen testified in a U.S. Senate subcommittee and the British Parliament over what has become known as "The Facebook Files."

After the *Wall Street Journal* broke the news story and CBS *60 Minutes* followed with an interview that first identified Haugen, the former Facebook insider was at the center of a media storm. Major media outlets – *The New York Times*, Associated Press, CNN and others – were among 17 newsrooms reviewing the documents. U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal, a subcommittee chair for Consumer Protection, Product Safety and Data Security, told CNN’s Reliable Sources program:

What we are hearing from Facebook is platitudes and bromides. When it says it wants regulation, at the same time it is fighting that regulation tooth and nail, day and night, with armies of lawyers, millions of dollars in lobbying. And so, I must say, Facebook saying it wants regulation is the height of disingenuousness.

(Jones, 2021, para. 12)

There was a political dance between the global technology and potential government regulators that tend to promote U.S. business. For its part, Facebook’s public relations statements through tweets claimed coordinated access to the leaked documents that amounted to an “orchestrated ‘gotcha’ campaign” (Allsop, 2021, para. 1):

The “consortium” agreed to publish its findings starting (Monday), but that agreement didn’t quite hold, and the first stories started to emerge on Friday, prompting a weekend flood. Many of them concerned Facebook’s role in the circulation of disinformation, not least around the 2020 US presidential election and subsequent insurrection.

(Allsop, 2021, para. 2)

Facebook algorithms appeared to be the culprit in keeping some users on site longer by pushing them “toward extreme, conspiratorial content” (Allsop, 2021, para. 2). The weaponization of Facebook apparently led to a heated internal company debate about lessening content moderation after the 2020 presidential election, but ahead of the #StopTheSteal Donald Trump rally that ended with violence at the U.S. Capitol before the election of Joseph Biden was certified by members of Congress.

Satariano (2021), meanwhile, wrote that Frances Haugen’s testimony before the British Parliament was part of a “tightly choreographed campaign to reveal internal Facebook research and discussions that paint a portrait of a company vividly aware of its harmful effects on society, contrary to public statements by company leaders” (Allsop, 2021, para. 2). In the UK, lawmakers raised concerns about

Facebook and Instagram posts that were homophobic, promoted teenage suicide, sparked ethnic violence, and encouraged hate speech.

INDUSTRY CHANGE TENSION

Social media content challenges also must be seen within a larger industry context of attracting and keeping audiences within key demographic groups. Social media platforms have contributed to a growing audience fragmentation problem (Lum, Martinez, & Soling, 2021). While Univision continues to have brand equity among Spanish viewers, for example, data also show that Hispanics were “looking to form their individual identities” (Lum, Martinez, & Soling, 2021, p. 122). While television networks frequently spread new ideas and trends, there is increased competition from youth-oriented social media platforms, such as TikTok. These are viewed by the industry as new channels “to deliver content and raise awareness” among targeted young and ethnic audience members (Lum, Martinez, & Soling, 2021, p. 128). Industry leaders and academics need the creation of new spaces to interact, share data, and create knowledge at the intersection of theory-driven data and industry practices. The historic divide between industry practices and academic research methods continues to exist, but social media data analysis may be a useful bridge between the two ways of observing and deriving new insights.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you were a Facebook or Instagram manager, how would you address the content moderation problems surrounding posts that promote hate and violence?
2. Should Facebook’s right to compete with other media and social media companies for advertising dollars be limited? If so, how?
3. What more can be done to protect social media users’ online data privacy? What are the potential limits to protecting our data privacy?

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Propaganda and Social Media Persuasion

“The visibility, speed and capacity for immediate response characterising social networks have become factors that multiply the effect of political influence”

(Pérez-Curiel & Limón Naharro, 2019, p. 58).

Some of Donald Trump’s use of Twitter for marketing his personal brand and ideas was within a “discursive format” that amplified “persuasion and **propaganda**” through traditional news media, and also the language characterising his personality” (Pérez-Curiel & Limón Naharro, 2019, p. 71). Clarke and Grieve discovered an evolution of communication over a decade that varied across “conversational, campaigning, engaged, and advisory styles of discourse” (Clarke & Grieve, 2019, p. 19). These appeared to align with Trump’s advocacy for the Birther movement (2011), the re-election of President Obama (2012), President Trump’s nomination and election (2016) and his inauguration (2017) that were born in the “seasons of his television series *The Apprentice*” (Clarke & Grieve, 2019, p. 19) Trump’s “toxic masculinity” reflected “a patriarchal and paternalistic discourse” that was “authoritative” (Pizarro-Sirera, 2020, pp. 166–167). The Trump narratives coincided in the replacement of traditional news usage with social media news sharing.

Research has found that increased Facebook use, for example, was negatively associated with political knowledge (Cacciatore et al., 2018). One possible explanation is that, “we may be observing a displacement effect where social media is replacing more traditional outlets for information” (Cacciatore et al., 2018, p. 420). By the end of the Trump presidency, #StopTheSteal social movement on Twitter reflected a negative response to the 2020 election result that ousted Trump.

Message credibility and source trust are important variables within democratic concerns about repression, disinformation and election insecurity (Shackelford, Raymond, Stemler & Loyle, 2020). “Generally conceived, digital repression is the coercive use of information and communication technologies by the state to exert control over potential and existing challenges and challengers” (Shackelford, Raymond, Stemler & Loyle, 2020, p. 1762). Bad actors may manipulate the political process through surveillance and monitoring, “advanced biometric monitoring, misinformation campaigns, and state-based hacking” (Shackelford, Raymond, Stemler & Loyle, 2020, pp. 1762–1763). The seemingly unlimited Twitter bandwidth leads to general questions connected to what computer-mediated communication scholars label propinquity theory. Immersive and media rich experiences of “social presence” may produce a perception of “relational closeness” that “describes the consequences” (Sherblom, 2020, p. 63).

The “Stop the Steal” phrase apparently was first introduced by Donald Trump’s strategist Roger Stone during the 2016 presidential election (Atlantic Council, 2021). During the post-election 2020 cycle, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) concluded that the language “serves primarily to dispute Democratic votes in urban, multiracial areas” (Hayden, 2020, para. 2). More recently, evidence surfaced the implicated Russian trolls in the targeting of racial minority groups predisposed to skepticism of political and healthcare leaders during the pandemic. By December 2020, there was a spike in the use of the #StopTheSteal hashtag across social media channels. For example, Facebook banned a group by the same name that had more than 300,000 members.

The shorthand phrase had not been needed after Trump was elected in 2016, but it *resurfaced* during the 2018 midterm election in Florida, and then again during the 2020 post-election challenge in several key electoral states. By embracing #StopTheSteal, disparate clusters could come together “...across the spectrum of radicalization coalesced around the disinformation-driving movement” (Atlantic Council, 2021, para. 10). Importantly, Trump’s use of the phrase and hashtag framed a social movement narrative that culminated with the riot at the U.S. Capitol (Atlantic Council, 2021, paras 10–11). Between September of 2020 and February 2021, more than 8,200 articles used the phrase or hashtag, and there was a December 2020 spike of 43.5 million engagements with the content

(Atlantic Council, 2021, para. 17). This included more than 21 million YouTube video views.

Data showed an orchestrated increase in the use of #StopTheSteal in mid-October – before the election – and this ran through the January 6 violence at the Capitol. The Atlantic Council analysis found that @JackProsobiec, a right-wing political commentator, used the phrase amid September predictions that President Trump would lose the election, and Trump echoed the concern. By November, #StopTheSteal became white code in Georgia for worries that black voter turnout would cost Trump the election.

The #StopTheSteal hashtag continued to be regularly used on Twitter in connection with a variety of stories about: Dominion Voting, Antifa, Cancel Culture, the Corona virus, immigration reform, fake news and other popular Republican political topics. These tended to align with the 24-hour political news cycle. The oldest social network analysis (SNA) within NodeXL Graph Gallery data collection found was from January 13, 2019 in a search of Twitter conversation about the Parkland school shooting in Florida. A search of CPAC the next month also contained the hashtag. The next most recent search was #voterfraud (August 3, 2020). The @realDonaldTrump account, which was banned amid the 2021 Capitol siege, was at the center of conversation. The top hashtags were: #voterfraud, #electionfraud, #election2020, #mailinballots, #vote, and #voterid – not #StopTheSteal, which gained momentum one month later. A link to one story from “The Sara Carter Show” was shared 1,534 times. It was a website account from Los Angeles media of four men sentenced for bribing homeless people with cigarettes to forge voter signatures. Carter’s Twitter account was among the most influential within the network data, along with other prominent conservative and Republican voices. Later searches about “Trump OR Biden,” “Mailfraud,” “fraud (election OR vote OR voter OR votes),” “(fraud OR fraudulent OR steal OR stolen)” and other related data searches all had uses of #StopTheSteal within tweets into November. Later, as news focus shifted to the Georgia election certification, that topic included #StopTheSteal uses. Racial, ethnic, gender and other forms of human hate are commonly found within these social media communication conversations.

SOCIAL MEDIA SITES AND HATE SPEECH

The most popular social media sites – Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, TikTok and Twitter – failed to remove most of the antisemitic hate speech content flagged by their systems. The Center to Counter Digital Hate (CCDH) found that “714 anti-Jewish posts” were “viewed 7.3 million times” (Shivaram, 2021, para. 3). CCDH CEO Imran Ahmed told National Public Radio that their research suggested that

growing antisemitism appears to “metastasize” and “is a phenomenally resilient cancer in our society” (Shivaram, 2021, para. 4). About 84 percent of the posts identified by the organization remained on the social media platforms. Similar results were found in research about Holocaust denials and neo-Nazi white supremacist images, but Facebook claimed to ban these. The CDCH (2021) report, “Failure to Protect: How tech giants fail to act on user reports of antisemitism,” found that TikTok removed just five percent of accounts that racially abused Jewish users (Shivaram, 2021, p. 20). The cite removed 16 of 119 (13.5 percent) posts reported to contain anti-Jewish hate (Shivaram, 2021, p. 8). Facebook’s CrowdTangle analytics tool showed that a post calling the Holocaust a “hoax” had thousands of interactions: 82,807 reactions, 122,516 comments, and 41,045 downloads (Shivaram, 2021, p. 8). Meanwhile, Instagram posts included anti-Jewish hate using racist portrayals and placing blame for the pandemic, as well as “supposedly dangerous vaccines” (Shivaram, 2021, p. 10). There was a pattern of antisemitic propaganda found across social media communication channels. Research has found that vaccine misinformation is spread quickly across social media sites, but it can be found in all news media – local news, television and even online stores (Fischer, 2021).

BLACK, WHITE AND GREY PROPAGANDA

Historic concern over misinformation can be traced to Harold Lasswell’s doctoral dissertation and book in 1927, as well as later books before and after World War II (Severin & Tankard, Jr., (2001, p. 108). Propaganda “...refers to the control of opinion by significant symbols, or, to speak more concretely and less accurately, by stories, rumors, reports, pictures, and other forms of social communication” (Severin & Tankard, Jr., 2001, p. 109, quoting Lasswell, 1927, p. 9). In all its forms – speech, text, images, or video – propaganda historically was connected to attempts to influence others through manipulation. The intent of the speaker and the impact on audiences are important when understanding context of types of propaganda as forms of modern persuasion. Such communication may use hate to rally others in support against a commonly perceived enemy.

The heart of the modern propaganda problem lies within difficulties surrounding how to distinguish propaganda from so-called “objective” information, and even the U.S. Supreme Court struggled with the issue in the *Meese v. Keene* (1987) case (Lipschultz, 1989, p. 25). Rather than settle on a definition of “political propaganda,” the majority of justices retreated to language found within statute law. The dissenters in the case, however, suggested that such labels fail to promote “pluralism” and instead claim a singular view of “truth” (Lipschultz, 1989, p. 26). The *Meese* case started in 1983 with a U.S. Department of Justice finding that

three Canadian documentaries about acid rain industrial air pollution should be labeled as “political propaganda” (Lipschultz, 1989, p. 30). The Reagan administration attempted to require labels and registration under the Foreign Registration Act passed in 1938. A lower court found significant First Amendment issues in that propaganda was “a semantically slanted word of reprobation,” however, the U.S. Supreme Court reversed because the Act did “not prohibit, edit or restrain distribution” (Lipschultz, 1989, p. 34). In a sense, the debate over propaganda is not unlike modern concerns about misinformation, although the current approach is to urge social media platforms to assume roles akin to state actors.

In the 1930s, propaganda had been seen as a fine art form for the use of opinions to influence the actions of others. Definitions morphed into persuasion with audience members urged to guard against “manipulation” and to inoculate themselves through information that would limit “susceptibility to persuasive messages” (Lipschultz, 1989, p. 37, fn. 71). Knapp (1944) concluded the early studies utilized an overlapping definition of propaganda and persuasion that, to some extent, became clearer by the 1950s and 1960s emphasis on active audiences and individual effects differences (Fellows, 1957). By then, the concern was about “(1) the volume of communicative and persuasive behavior, in (2) the variety of contents, points of view and objectives of such behavior, and in (3) the number of persons at whom communication is typically directed” (Fellows, 1957, p. 431). Mass audiences were seen as susceptible to messages that might not have been effective within “a smaller society” that was based upon “direct personal acquaintance” (Fellows, 1957, p. 432). New technologies commonly serve large, heterogenous media audiences, and social media communication followed this established pattern – except some homogenous subgroups tended to cluster among those sharing similar attributes. Fellows identified a “feeling of insecurity” that may contribute to both “increased use of mass persuasion” *and* “distrust of mass persuasion” (Fellows, 1957, p. 432). This paradox that continues to function within social media misinformation spread may be magnified by an existing general level of insecurity and fear during an extended global pandemic.

“The term *propaganda* comes from *Congregatio de propaganda fide*, or Congregation for the Propagation of Faith, established by the Catholic Church in 1622” (Severin & Tankard, Jr., 2001, p. 108). Counter Reformation messages were used within the religious division. Propaganda “devices” have included “name calling,” “glittering generality,” “transfer” and other techniques (Severin & Tankard, Jr., 2001, pp. 111–116). It should not be surprising that social media campaigns, including advertising and marketing paid programs, have deployed manipulation in attempting to influence others. As news, information, entertainment and other content migrated to online sites, trust and credibility became issues, and “...the

proliferation of information” was predicted to “heighten the need for consumers to be analytic and skeptical (Jamieson & Campbell, 2001, p. 280).

Persuasion has been related to ancient Greek “rhetoric,” Aristotle and research about elaboration likelihood:

The persuader controls artistic proof such as the choice of evidence, the organization of the persuasion, style of delivery, and language choices. Inartistic proof includes things not controlled by the speaker, such as the occasion, the time allotted to the speaker, and the speaker’s physical appearance.

(Larson, 2008, p. 11)

Ethos, or credibility, may be amplified through emotional pathos, as well as “common ground, which is the shared beliefs, values, and interests existing between persuaders and persuades” (Larson, 2008, p. 11). The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) may be cognitively conscious or “peripheral” or “without direct focusing or researching of the decision” (Larson, 2008, p. 13). Persuasion as seen as one component within a larger model of social influence. “Repetition” of “slogans, jingles, recurring examples or themes” may lead to “association” – even when misinformation contains “omission,” or “diversion” that leads to “confusion” (Larson, 2008, p. 19). Social media communication is likely to accelerate the spread of information regardless of veracity.

Education and media literacy skills are seen as essential to inoculating people and creating resistance toward information distributed by bad actors. Yet, we continue to live in a world of advertising, marketing, interest group messaging, political campaign rhetoric and other speech that attempts to persuade others by establishing source and message credibility. To the extent that *messages reinforce existing views*, they are more likely to persuade others. Proposals for government regulation of misinformation and disinformation appear to follow the earlier path of political propaganda in that these typically assume audience effects without an analysis of existing social science research. The early black, white and grey propaganda framework also was based upon an assessment of the intent of a speaker and the beliefs of a homogenous audience. These assumptions are doomed to policy failure when not grounded in theories, concepts and rigorous scientific methods that yield to deeper understanding about social media effects.

PERSUASION AND ATTITUDE CHANGE RESEARCH

Classic persuasion research that focused on attitudes was replaced by political communication research that explored the visual communication of photographs and

video that are so important on Instagram and its Reels, as well as TikTok. For example, TikTok “Spark Ads” allow politicians to feature viral organic fan content by further promoting these when creators consent. Memes also are used as communication campaign **tactics** to provide users with media richness and propinquity that cultivate **para-social relationships (PSR)** between political figures and their **fans**. Social media audience members may be encouraged to actively comment and share memes or other engaging content across their social networks. While a majority of audience members remain passive receivers of thought leader content inside and outside campaigns, there may be demographic, geographic and psychographic determinants that help explain why people want to influence others. Geotargeted or geo-**tagging** information, for example, may reinforce political polarization by violating data privacy principles. Amid regulatory threats, Meta Facebook is developing TikTok-like precision algorithms that quickly send content to profiled users. Political campaigns in the U.S. are fairly free of concerns about regulation of their propaganda. Similarly, there is no concerted effort to demand ethical behaviors when contacting news media, using social media communication or diving into data in order to create campaigns designed to form and manipulate public opinion.

Box 6.1: Thought Leader: Jennifer M. Grygiel

U.S. State Media is a Threat to American Democracy

The term “fake news” was thrown around by President Trump on what seemed like an almost daily basis during his term in office. Trump’s intent to suppress the free press was painfully obvious when he tweeted that the “fake” news media were the “true Enemy of the People” (Breuninger, 2018). But what was less obvious at the time was how US state-controlled media was also threatening the free press and becoming the “real news.” Baby boomers who lived through the Cold War may recognize U.S. state media outlets, such as Voice of America (VOA), but few will likely realize it became domestically accessible. Mention this network, or the lesser-known outlet Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), to a millennial and there is little chance that they will know that it’s produced under the United States Agency for Global Media (“USAGM,” formerly known as the Broadcasting Board of Governors or “BBG”) or paid for by congress. The USAGM’s size alone allows it to compete with



FIGURE 6.1 *Jennifer M. Grygiel (@jmgrygiel), Syracuse University. Source: photograph by Andrea Basteris*

the largest independent news networks in the world (Grygiel & Sager, 2020), which runs counter to its stated mission of supporting it.

U.S. State Media’s Propaganda Roots

After World War II, Congress established a peacetime state media network for promoting American ideals abroad with the passage of the “Information and Educational Exchange Act of 1948”—commonly known as the “Smith-Mundt Act” (Grygiel & Sager, 2020). The act contained key provisions to protect “free society” that prohibited US state media from being distributed domestically which shielded Americans from being propagandized by their own government (Snyder, 2021, p. 263). Congress went on to reinforce the domestic dissemination ban with legislative amendments in the 1970s and 1980s until a drastic policy shift in 2013 permitted it to be disseminated domestically for the first time.

Congress rushed the Smith-Mundt Modernization Act through in 2012 and justified it in the name of national security despite the inherent propaganda risks and America’s historical distaste for government-sponsored media (Thornberry, 2012; Grygiel & Sager, 2020). A few years

after the amendment passed, state social media page growth soared in advance of the 2016 US presidential election. To make matters worse, social media pages often lack proper attribution (Grygiel & Sager, 2020), which obscures the federal government as the source – YouTube being one of the few notable exceptions (Gold, 2018).

Between January 2014 and July 2021, the growth of VOA, USAGM's flagship state media network, eclipsed that of major corporate media outlets. For example, in December 2015, during the Obama administration, VOA growth surpassed CNN International, and in March 2017, under the Trump administration, it surpassed the BBC (Figure 6.2). Its rapid rise is especially notable given that people are increasingly relying on platforms such as Facebook for news (Shearer, 2021). It is possible that much of VOA's audience is international, but this is hard to monitor and there could be a significant U.S. audience which conflicts with the Smith-Mundt Act.

When viewed in context, one can see that U.S. state media increased across different presidential administrations and political parties. This may be because state media can be used as a tool by republicans and democrats alike for cultivating public support. It is important to note,

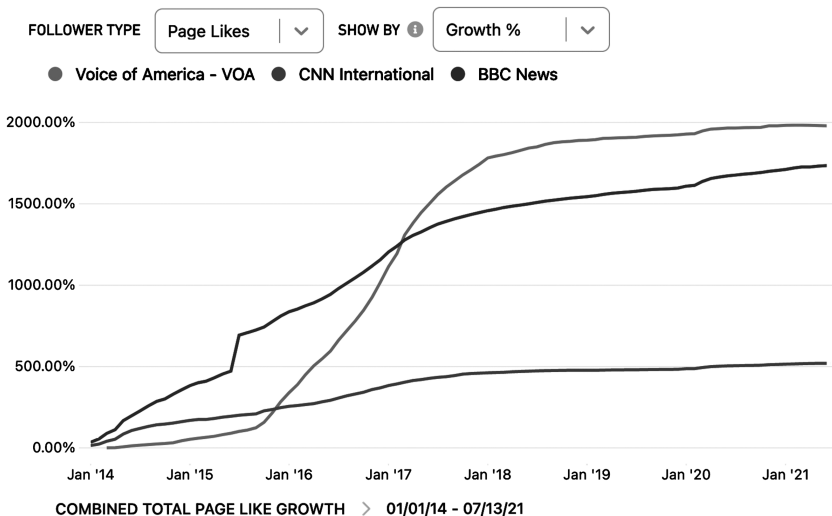


FIGURE 6.2 *Meta Facebook CrowdTangle data (2021). Source: Meta Facebook CrowdTangle*

however, that the accelerating proliferation of state media may be stoking authoritarian tendencies and that propagandizing Americans is not justifiable in the public interest as “there is no democratic propaganda” (Ellul & Kellen, 1973, p. 241).

The growing complexity of the Smith-Mundt Act and U.S. state media has increased the propaganda risks domestically, yet few political communications scholars may be aware of this development. The focus of state media, propaganda and disinformation research is more commonly related to foreign threats than domestic ones that could be negatively impacting American discourse.

In the past, Americans understood “that a candidate’s campaign brochure, or an organization’s press release, or a corporation’s prospectus...” was not journalism (Anderson, 2002, p. 453). But when Congress lifted the U.S. state media dissemination ban, they enacted a backdoor for the federal government to produce “news” to domestically influence public opinion. More research is needed in this area because citizens are now exposed to U.S. state media and may be vulnerable to its influence. Content is packaged to appear as independent news. Unfortunately, optics are not the only concern. U.S. state media repeatedly violated law (Roose, 2018).

U.S. State Media Abuse

Research uncovered how RFE/RL was illegally targeting Facebook ads at Americans in the U.S. (Roose, 2018). The 2013 update to the Smith-Mundt Act still prohibits USAGM networks, such as RFE/RL, from promoting its content domestically as the law preserved two key protections: (1) USAGM content still needs to be requested (often referred to as “upon request”) by Americans, which would rule out marketing activities such as targeted domestic ads, and (2) U.S. state media is still prohibited from cultivating a U.S. audience (Grygiel & Sager, 2020). In this case, ads financed by the USAGM that targeted American citizens clearly violated the law because the readers did not request the information and were subject to a “push” marketing strategy (Meijer & Thaens, 2013).

Research also found examples of U.S. state media ads targeting the United States that promoted “liking” USAGM pages, which also violates

the Smith-Mundt Act. For example, the Current Time network page, which is produced by RFE/RL, was promoted to Americans in ads with the prompt to “like” the page. This is an advertising tool specifically used to build an audience (Figure 6.3).

The President of RFE/RL passed the abuse of as a mistake in a letter to *The New York Times* (Kent, 2018), but subsequent inquiries by the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations unveiled significant abuse and that over 500,000 Americans were blanketed with state media from RFE/RL (Grygiel & Sager, 2020).

When John Lansing, the CEO of the USAGM at the time, was pressed by the chairman of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on

Same of the ads being promoted within the United States (all captured July 16, 2018):

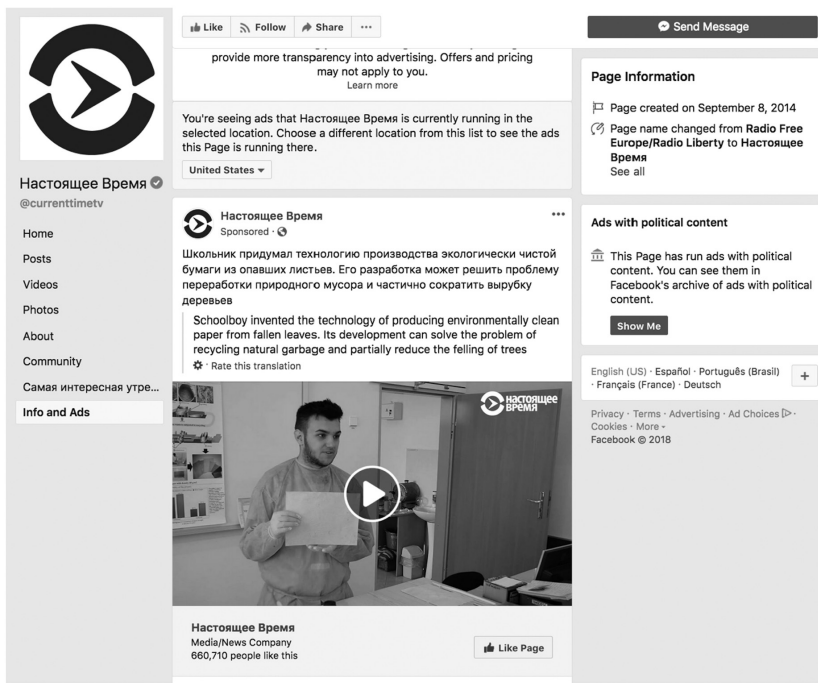


FIGURE 6.3 Grygiel, Syracuse screen captured July 16, 2018. Source: Syracuse University Current Time network screen capture

Foreign Affairs, Rep. Ed Royce (R-CA), we learned that the issue was much larger and that other USAGM networks, including VOA, had been illegally targeting Americans with ads for years spanning both the Obama and Trump administrations. Unlike the Senate which failed to release its findings publicly, the House issued a detailed public oversight report (House Foreign Affairs Committee, 2018). The disparity between how an investigation led by a democrat verses a republican inquiry shows how abuse and oversight is politicized. In this case, abuse dating back to appointees under a democratic president was not made public by democratic leadership. Given the timing of my finding, the republican leadership made sure to date the abuse back to the Obama era.

Despite the failed management and leadership at the USAGM, John Lansing was later appointed as the CEO of NPR during the Trump era. He still serves in this capacity today under the Biden administration. Michael Pack, Trump's pick to replace Lansing as CEO of the USAGM, was mired in controversy during his brief tenure widespread layoffs and poor treatment USAGM staff. This case shows how abuse can be underreported and executives are moved to new key roles as well as how public media may come under political influence.

Since 2018, transparency surrounding U.S. state media has suffered after Facebook quietly removed the ads I reported from its archive after the Senate and House investigations. The U.S. government under Trump also stalled in responding to related Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA") requests for years, with one Trump-era FOIA attorney admitting to me that, before President Biden was elected, they were not allowed to talk to anyone. The Biden administration, however, has not proven to be much better at responding to FOIA requests. While the delays are shorter, the USAGM's FOIA office is engaging in suppression by sending low-quality and heavily redacted information.

Future Issues

The 2013 amendment to the Smith-Mundt Act is not likely to be the last amendment to this legislation. Given the trajectory of Congressional

legislation, and the conduct of the USAGM, the end goal appears to be endowing the USAGM with the unrestricted ability to disseminate its state media to Americans.

In the interim, considerable loopholes and policy drift has emerged with executives pushing the boundaries of the “upon request” portion of the law (Hacker, 2004). For example, Amanda Bennett, frequently published opinions in the *Washington Post* when she was the Director of VOA with embedded hyperlinks to VOA content and also appeared on a 2018 news integrity panel at SXSW music festival in the United States (W20 Partner Programming, 2018). The revised Smith-Mundt Act is so easy to drift over now it can hardly be considered a barrier to propagandizing Americans. U.S. citizens can even take a course in public policy at Syracuse University in Washington DC with adjuncts who are also current USAGM executives. I don’t believe that Senator Fulbright would have approved of this “student-teacher exchange” (Syder, 2012, p. 21) as it would be too easy to act in a personal capacity in support of the federal government and its agenda.

Threat to Democracy

While no one could have predicted the election of Donald Trump and his unconventional use of platforms like Twitter (Grygiel & Luttrell, 2018), propaganda scholars such as Jacques Ellul did forewarn of the risks associated with the rise of technology and how it leads to authoritarian tendencies in democracies (Ellul & Kellen, 1973). Not even the events of January 6, 2021, and a sitting president using social media to attack Congress, could shift people’s attitude enough to compel the government to curb its propaganda. This is a sign of the depth of American propaganda and how it’s used to create artificial “truth” (Ellul & Kellen, 1973, p. 235).

A weakened Smith-Mundt Act, coupled with the rise of social media and U.S. state media, has created a situation where the free press is not only losing its ability to serve as a gatekeeper (White, 1950; Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) and watchdog, but one where the U.S. government has a greater ability to influence domestic public opinion (Grygiel & Lysak, 2020).

Technological and propaganda risks got worse during the Obama era and persisted through Trump's term and into Biden's. More education and awareness are needed regarding US state media, and propaganda generally. We need to work to preserve what is left of democracy while we await the election of political leaders who are willing to curb their own propaganda power.

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The blurring of perceived “news” sources across government and corporate channels was made worse by the popularity of Facebook during events. The Facebook newsfeed has been confusing for users in terms of information message and source credibility.

CASE STUDY: INSIDE FACEBOOK

The investigation into the January 2021 U.S. Capitol riot revealed that inside Facebook there appeared to be turmoil following the presidential election. At the heart of it was an internal struggle over loosening platform controls in the weeks following election day. Suderman and Goodman (2021) reported that the storming of the Capitol produced a panicked response at Facebook:

Thousands of miles away, in California, Facebook engineers were racing to tweak internal controls to slow the spread of misinformation and inciteful content. Emergency actions — some of which were rolled back after the 2020 election — included banning Trump, freezing comments in groups with a record for hate speech, filtering out the “Stop the Steal” rallying cry and empowering content moderators to act more assertively by labeling the U.S. a “Temporary High Risk Location” for political violence.

(Suderman & Goodman, 2021, para. 2)

Voices inside the huge social media company apparently complained that Facebook had allowed “rising extremism” to resume its spread across the site (Suderman & Goodman, 2021, para. 3). “It quickly became clear that even after years under the microscope for insufficiently policing its platform, the social network had missed how riot participants spent weeks vowing – on Facebook itself – to stop Congress from certifying Joe Biden’s election victory” (Suderman & Goodman, 2021, para. 6).

The content management problem may be even larger at global scale. In India, for example, after a whistleblower leak to the press, Facebook documents that were revealed suggested that the company was “selective in curbing hate speech, misinformation and inflammatory posts” that were “anti-Muslin” (Sheikh & Pathi, 2021, para. 1). For about two years, Facebook failed to manage its fastest growing site: “Communal and religious tensions in India have a history of boiling over on social media and stoking violence” (Sheikh & Pathi, 2021, para. 2):

The leaked documents include a trove of internal company reports on hate speech and misinformation in India. In some cases, much of it was intensified by its own “recommended” feature and algorithms. But they also include the company staffers’ concerns over the mishandling of these issues and their discontent expressed about the viral “malcontent” on the platform.

(Sheikh & Pathi, 2021, para. 6)

Facebook appeared to seek AI solutions for spotting Hindi and Bengali language hate speech when it did not have “enough local language moderators or content-flagging in place to stop misinformation that at times led to real-world violence” (Sheikh & Pathi, 2021, para. 7). Those bad actors around the world escalating violence see Facebook as a useful tool for reinforcing ethnic and political division.

Across the globe, content meaning also is challenging for social issues, such as the environment and climate change. The intersection of corporate governance, environmental sustainability and CSR is central to the interests of shareholders and the stock market (Laskin, 2022):

Issue management is commonly defined as the anticipatory strategic management process of identifying and responding to issues facing an organization. The issues are not static – they grow or shrink, the number of stakeholders involved changes. and the issues increase or decrease in importance to those stakeholders.

(Laskin, 2022, p. 107)

An oil spill, for example, is sure to spark intense news media coverage and social media conversation. The environmental sustainability narrative includes events

that news media gatekeepers or social media influencers spread to the broader, ongoing social conversation. Various organizations, as well as influencers within them, compete for a share of voice (SoV) on the issues. Social media platforms also have a stake in many issues, such as government regulation designed to protect children. Laskin (2022), in discussing **citizen activism** and crisis management, offered the example of Reddit’s 2021 5-second Super Bowl advertisement followed by its post: “Powerful things happen when people rally around something they really care about” (Laskin, 2022, p. 126). Reddit positioned itself as *the* site for activists to engage with others about social issues. It is clear that corporations and activists utilize social media channels to address various issues related to sustainability.

Box 6.2: Understanding Sustainability Within SMC and Policy-making

The word “sustainability” is used with many meanings within social media communication. Pulsar Marketing hosted a webinar to report data connected to the sustainability discussion:

Sustainability is one of the most important ideas, and words, of our time. But as interest in the concept keeps growing, its meaning is becoming murkier, and harder to grasp: the word seems to mean very different things to companies, investors, shoppers, activists, institutions, and citizens.

(Berretta, 2021, para. 1)

As communication grows and intensifies on a social issue, meaning may become clouded. Pulsar found more businesses and products were talking about sustainability on Twitter, but the conversation varied. In technology, it was related to the new Metaverse and crypto currencies, while others discussed biodiversity, China, airlines, taxes, recycling, the United Nations, entrepreneur Elon Musk and child activist Greta Thunberg.

Sources for the sustainability discussion split across corporations (31.4 percent), the public (28.9 percent), governments (22.6 percent) and media (13.6 percent). Mentions across all social channels were highest for eco, green, carbon, renewable, organic and ethical. Pulsar

found a split in **sentiment**, for example, between positive Pinterest pins about ethical fall fashion and negative tweets about a COVID-19 protest.

Hope, habit, self-worth, creativity and innovation, duty and future generations were positive motivations that outflanked negative guilt and signaling. Individuals focused upon ethical consumption, reducing waste, growing your own food, eating less meat and thrift shopping as behaviors to have positive impact on the environment. These appeared to be driven by habit, hope and self-worth. Political partisans, however, clustered within Twitter sub-groups. This finding was consistent with social-network analysis (SNA) of sustainability Twitter data (Lipschultz, 2018). “The term *sustainability* has become a popular way for organizations to embrace notions of corporate social responsibility (CSR), but it also is a broad term used in a variety of social contexts” (Lipschultz, 2018, p. 36). Green businesses, organizations and government have been found to be the most likely to tweet links to website content within a “relatively constant set of words” (Lipschultz, 2018, p. 45). Top corporate executives within the **C-suite** may take advantage of CSR rhetoric in an effort to make themselves look good to political leaders and the public.

The sustainability narrative is increasingly complex, yet positioned to brand thought leaders and organizations as socially responsible. The more corporations, for example, can associate themselves with CSR, the less they may become targets of new government regulation. The politics of regulation suggests that CSR may be used as a social capital tool, and the sustainability narrative fits previous models. Regulated industries and citizens groups continue to lobby branches of the U.S. government – the White House, Congress and agencies – promoting change or the status quo within a “policy-making system” that also includes the courts (Krasnow, Longley & Terry, 1982, p. 136).

Sustainability is a useful area of research focus within CSR. From climate change to diminished natural resources, short-term crises tend to overshadow the longer-term view that would promote behavioral change in the interest of human survival on the planet.

Other polarizing political issues also present opportunities for research that helps us understand context. One study of immigration mentions on Facebook compared the second term of Barack Obama to that of Donald Trump between 2013 and 2020 (Sadler, 2021). Agenda-building was used to explore media and public officials' impact on policy influence. While audience engagement on Facebook pages of news and entertainment sites could potentially influence further coverage, it is their role in reinforcing or dismantling racial assumptions attached to eventual policy decisions that should be examined" (Sadler, 2021, p. 512). Critical race theory (CRT), for example, includes the study of shifting policies toward people of color, but U.S. state legislatures and governing boards have attacked public universities for promotion of diversity. "Data here may indicate shifts in coverage and social promotion decisions that rely not only on relationships with political figures but also audiences and their digital interaction behaviors" (Sadler, 2021, p. 521). The critical race theory study of changing policies aligned with increased interest in engaging in the social media content.

It is clear that there has been an overall rise in social media propaganda designed to manipulate public opinion and voting decisions. The future of national and global democratic politics depends upon news and information that is factual, clearly labeled opinions and limits on bad state actor behavior.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why has propaganda emerged as a topic for concern within democratic nations?
2. Which policy-making institutions do you believe wield the most power in Washington, D.C. on political issues related to social media? Why?
3. How has critical race theory become a political wedge within partisan and polarized social networks? What can be done to diffuse conflict?

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Normative Law, Ethics and Critical Examination

“A major challenge facing policymakers is how to adapt this approach of public interest responsibilities to the case of social media companies to ensure that it provides for needed content moderation without diminishing the discussion of a wide variety of political perspectives”

Mark MacCarthy (@Mark_MacCarthy), Georgetown University

As Congress considered reigning in the power of social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, there was a temptation to pass laws that would create regulation similar to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) licensing of broadcast stations (MacCarthy, 2021). Existing Section 230 language offered no right of access for social media users, and did not treat sites as historic telephone companies:

Common carriage for social media is a bad idea, however. It would mean treating social media as if they were telephone companies, obligated to pick up and deliver all legal messages from their subscribers. This mandate to carry all legal messages

would render social media companies unable to address the legal but harmful hate speech, terrorist material and disinformation rampant on their systems.

(MacCarthy, 2021, para. 6)

Licensing of media, however, runs counter to the First Amendment and free expression analysis. Further, we must understand that traditional broadcast regulation resulted in numerous policy failures inherent within political processes (Krasnow, Longley, & Terry, 1982). Beyond Congress, the White House, federal agencies and the courts, policies are subject to influence from “regulated industries,” and “citizens groups” (Krasnow, Longley, & Terry, 1982, p.136). Policy failures can be traced to “conflicting goals,” “limited resources,” “unequal strengths,” “subgroups” disagreements, “policy progression” within “small or incremental steps,” use of “legal and ideological symbols,” and “mutual accommodation” that frequently never resolves issues (Krasnow, Longley, & Terry, 1982, pp. 278–283). In the end, stricter government controls may, at least sometimes, be “ineffective or counterproductive” (Krasnow, Longley, & Terry, 1982, p. 284).

U.S. state laws also must be considered. Some were under judicial review that proposed requiring social media platform transparency during a decision to ban a user – particularly in the case of current office holders and political candidates during elections. Some Republicans continued to respond to Twitter’s lifetime ban of @realDonaldTrump – even as Congress investigated the former president for not stopping the deadly Capitol riot aimed at halting the certification of Joe Biden as president. In *NetChoice v. Paxton* (2021) a U.S. District Court in Austin, granted a preliminary injunction in a case against the Texas state attorney general. A bill “allow Texans to participate on the virtual public square free from Silicon Valley censorship” (*NetChoice v. Paxton*, 2021, p. 1). Governor Greg Abbott (@GregAbbott_TX) “voiced his support, tweeting ‘[s]ilencing conservative views is un-American, it’s un-Texan[,] and it’s about to be illegal in Texas’” ... (*NetChoice v. Paxton*, 2021, p. 2). HB 20 sought to stop Twitter and others from exercising viewpoint discrimination. It would make illegal for sites to:

...censor a user, a user’s expression, or a user’s ability to receive the expression of another person based on: (1) the viewpoint of the user or another person; (2) the viewpoint represented in the user’s expression; or (3) a user’s geographic location in this state or any part of this state.

(*NetChoice v. Paxton*, 2021, p. 2)

The state legislation would apply to large, public sites of 50 million or more – including Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest, TikTok, Vimeo, WhatsApp, YouTube

and others. The bill specifically exempted Internet service providers (ISPs), email and news or sports sites. Lawmakers were seeking the First Amendment boundaries of federal Section 230 third-party immunity. NetChoice also was challenging a similar law in Florida, and that court found that government has no interest in balancing free expression among private speakers. It applied a strict scrutiny analysis in concluding that content regulation applying to only the largest sites violates the First Amendment. The Texas court cited *Reno v. ACLU* (1997) to conclude that the U.S. Supreme Court protected editorial discretion of social media companies:

Making those decisions entails some level of editorial discretion, *id.*, even if portions of those tasks are carried out by software code. While this Court acknowledges that a social media platform's editorial discretion does not fit neatly with our 20th Century vision of a newspaper editor hand-selecting an article to publish, focusing on whether a human or AI makes those decisions is a distraction. It is indeed new and exciting—or frightening, depending on who you ask – that algorithms do some of the work that a newspaper publisher previously did, but the core question is still whether a private company exercises editorial discretion over the dissemination of content, not the exact process used.

(NetChoice v. Paxton, 2021, p. 16)

The Texas court was “convinced” that sites covered under HB 20 “...curate both users and content to convey a message about the type of community the platform seeks to foster and, as such, exercise editorial discretion over their platform's content” (*NetChoice v. Paxton*, 2021, p. 16). As such, the state law would be a clear First Amendment violation. District Judge Robert Pitman wrote that government cannot discriminate against users and content, but the platforms maintain community standards that require editorial decision-making.

Students of social media political communication must understand legal and ethical risks related to use and misuse through **utilitarianism**. A foundation of First Amendment law and free expression theories may assist in managing political or commercial speech across social media channels. Posting on social platforms opens users to legal liability from lapses in judgment. For example, a few words within a tweet may invade privacy, damage reputation, be considered indecent or obscene, or violate **copyright** and trademark intellectual property (IP) laws. While U.S. statute law under Section 230 has limited site liability over potentially damaging content, users may be sued by others, or even charged under federal criminal law of threats. The Internet has been viewed as a public forum that enjoys broad protection from government censorship and control, but content creators are expected under the law to avoid harm to others. Beyond this, employers

commonly create social media policies that limit employee voice when it comes to the corporate or organizational brand.

Individuals also should be aware of applied ethical norms found in the Potter Box that focuses on understanding facts, values, principles and loyalties (Patterson & Wilkins, 2005). However, modern political communication frequently contests the facts, **loyalty**, truths and the foundational values of human behavior. Situational ethics of morality can be problematic because these temporal standards may vary within a particular context. As the rules quickly change, a **code of ethics** may be challenging to apply within a social media moment or to flagged content: “Only intermittently did the scholars of media ethics scrutinize the transformation in technological form” (Christians, 2019, p. 7). In other words, we do not yet understand how to apply global values across national standards or codes that would reach universal agreement about what expression is ethical or unethical on the Internet.

Individual or corporate desires to quickly increase a social media following may fail to serve a broader public interest or sense of social responsibility. In response, Twitter and Facebook added labels during the COVID pandemic to warn readers and viewers through inoculation against misinformation or disinformation. More recently, Twitter tested new tools to allow users to limit who may reply to a tweet. At the same time, the company revamped misinformation labeling after it learned from focus group research that the word “disputed” backfired as a way to promote transparency (Ortutay, 2021, para. 2). Twitter struggled to make labels stand out with bright colors – a practice that also led some to “retweet and reply to the original tweet” that contained “misinformation” (Ortutay, 2021, para. 8). These efforts at self-regulation also come at the expense of wide-open freedom of expression.

The larger context for political communication law and ethics, such as virtues found within the **golden mean** or religiously-based **natural law**, may be difficult to negotiate amid extreme partisan polarization. Newspaper journalism sought to find a balance through its methods of **objectivity**, but professional journalists lost jobs at a record pace over the past two decades, and untrained writers are more likely to violate norms, such as the need to be transparent about personal financial interests (Arbel, 2021). Newspapers erected **paywalls** that limited access to public information. At the same time, law is being transformed through adoption of artificial intelligence (AI), natural language chatbot technologies and new digital currencies across global communication channels. Eight in ten YouTube views, for example, happen outside of the United States. What was once a domestic innovation rapidly evolved into important technologies for free expression. Transparency is required under the GDPR principles that also promote the law through fairness,

legitimate data collection, accuracy, security, and limited storage. Sophisticated **data visualization** methods are not well understood by the public and lawmakers. A **right to be forgotten (RTBF)** has emerged that can lead to data deletion on websites, search engines and social media channels.

FREE EXPRESSION VALUES OR STRICT GOVERNMENT CONTROL

As social media communication practices matured, there was a shift toward restricting free expression during times of political tension. During elections in Zambia, for example, WhatsApp was reported to be restricted (Kene-Okafor, 2021). “Countries like Cameroon, Congo, Uganda, Tanzania, Guinea, Togo, Benin, Mali and Mauritania have faced social media restrictions and internet shutdowns during elections,” and Chad, Nigeria and Ethiopia “have experienced similar restrictions for unrelated events” (Kene-Okafor, 2021, para. 8). Netblocks (@Netblocks) has tracked similar government control over online communication around the world (Netblocks, 2021). Attempts to stifle free speech, even in times of social unrest, run counter to values rooted in a desire for broader political freedom. The uses and misuses of social media are challenging for political leaders. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the president of Turkey, has repeatedly called social media **deception** a threat to what he considers a democracy. “Social media, which was described as a symbol of freedom when it first appeared, has turned into one of the main sources of threat to today’s democracy” (Associated Press, 2021, para. 3). “We try to protect our people, especially the vulnerable sections of our society, against lies and disinformation without violating our citizens’ right to receive accurate and impartial information” (Associated Press, 2021, para. 4). User-generated content frequently contests what is truth in countries that use power for purposes of social control. In Turkey, the largest social media platforms were pressured through new law to store data and maintain corporate representatives within the country. The result is heavy handed regulation designed to criminalize the spread of disinformation and fake news, so defined, punishable with lengthy prison terms. Turkey also controls news media organizations, and social media communication has been used to express dissent.

Even with historic democracies, such as the U.S., digital media freedom is contested by political and legal authorities. WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, detained for years in the UK, appeared to be headed for extradition for a spy trial in the U.S. (Kirka & Lawless, 2021).

Since WikiLeaks began publishing classified documents more than a decade ago, Assange has become a lightning rod for both criticism and veneration.

Some see him as a dangerous secret-spiller who endangered the lives of informers and others who helped the U.S. in war zones. Others say WikiLeaks has publicized official malfeasance that governments wanted to keep secret. Both views have been debated as Assange has sought his freedom – and to evade the Americans.

(Kirka & Lawless, 2021, paras 5–7)

Freedom of expression frequently clashes with laws designed to protect personal reputation, data privacy or national security.

U.S. MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS APPROACHES

American 20th Century legal approaches gradually embraced the marketplace of ideas – particularly when core political speech was thought to involve robust debate on public issues (*Abrams v. United States*, 1919; *New York Times v. Sullivan*, 1964; *Schenck v. United States*, 1919). Limits were placed upon government censorship of prior restraints before the speech or publication happened (*Near v. Minnesota*, 1931). In general, the First Amendment theory was that good ideas eventually would win out over bad ones. A clear and present danger test of immediate harm replaced the 19th-Century fears for any communication with a bad tendency toward, for example, violent acts. This extended to the actions of state governments through the preferred position doctrine found within Fourteenth Amendment rights. However, among the *Near* exceptions was **obscenity** that was found to be outside the umbrella of First Amendment protection from government restrictions. The *Miller* test applied an average person and contemporary community standards appeal to prurient interests; patently offensive sexual conduct under state law; and lack of serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value (*Miller v. California*, 1973). Most communication that is considered indecent, offensive or pornographic has some constitutional protection. On the other hand, child pornography is most clearly obscene and illegal under the *Miller* test applied through state law by judges or juries.

A lack of prior restraints under U.S. law, though, does not protect speakers from potential subsequent punishment when communication damages reputation, invades privacy or breaks other laws. While expressive conduct, such as burning an American flag, was found to be protected under the First Amendment as symbolic speech (*Texas v. Johnson*, 1989), the government may offer a compelling interest in regulation that is not targeted at censoring free exchange of political ideas (*United States v. O'Brien*, 1968).

In *Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969), the U.S. Supreme Court provided limited protection for action that may not pose an immediate danger, as measured by the

history of a speaker's previous behavior and the likelihood that an illegal action will actually happen. When a free press seeks to report on criminal charges, courts generally may not stop news reporters and editors with a gag order (*Nebraska Press v. Stuart*, 1976).

Public high school students also may exercise First Amendment rights when the speech does not disrupt a school's educational mission (*Tinker v. Des Moines*, 1969). Beyond political speech, increasingly **commercial speech** also carries with it First Amendment protection (*Central Hudson v. Public Service Commission*, 1980). When the speech happens online, a First Amendment right of publishers is fairly extensive (*Reno v. ACLU*, 1997).

HATE SPEECH, CYBERBULLYING AND REVENGE PORN

There is substantial First Amendment protection for hate speech that does not threaten individuals, but criminal threats law depends upon a jury making a state of mind assessment (*Elonis v. United States*, 2015). Some social movements employ more general hate toward groups, but the law depends upon cases and conflicts. Hate is commonly found within social media content in the form of "trolling, harassment and hate speech in online discourse" (Guo & Johnson, 2020, p. 1):

...even participants who reported high levels of paternalism would not perceive any effects of racist hate speech on self and on the general public. It might indicate that participants might not take such hate speech on Facebook as seriously as sexist or anti-LGBT messages. In addition, as racist hate speech is pervasive on Facebook..., the other potential reason might be because people have become accustomed to such messages and failed to identify such messages as racist hate speech.

(Guo & Johnson, 2020, p. 9)

The study found some evidence that First Amendment core values also limited support for content moderation on Facebook. Social media communication users in the U.S. may accept a degree of troubling speech in exchange for their support of free expression.

COMMERCIAL SPEECH, DISCLOSURE, TRANSPARENCY AND THE FIRST AMENDMENT

The U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) employs the *Central Hudson v. Public Service Commission* (1980) commercial speech First Amendment test in regulating deceptive advertising, as well as marketing of illegal products and services:

At the outset, we must determine whether the expression is protected by the First Amendment. For commercial speech to come within that provision, it at least must concern lawful activity and not be misleading. Next, we ask whether the asserted governmental interest is substantial. If both inquiries yield positive answers, we must determine whether the regulation directly advances the governmental interest asserted, and whether it is not more extensive than is necessary to serve that interest.

(Central Hudson v. Public Service Commission, 1980, p. 566)

The FTC’s reasonable consumer standard has been applied to Instagram influencers failing to disclose financial interests.

At the same time, courts protect intellectual property (IP) rights. Copyright and trademarks are protected across social media channels, but typically owners must assert these with a cease-and-desist letter followed by a lawsuit. Political campaigns sometimes have used music before and after a rally that represents a clear violation. Facebook Live, YouTube and other streaming services have filtered by muting copyrighted music that is not licensed, content may be deleted and users may be banned.

Political speech is protected under *New York Times v. Sullivan* (1964), and this means that political propaganda – even disinformation – may appear within social media posts. Donald Trump’s lifetime Twitter ban happened within a context of his apparent promotion for violence at the U. S. Capitol in an attempt to stop election certification. Twitter and other social media platforms have “de-platformed” others for repeated violation of site rules.

We expect journalists on social media to exercise their First Amendment rights, and also to follow new media ethical norms. Clearly, there is variation across media by local digital reporters and editors called “MMJs.” Similarly, thought leaders within political spaces vary in their willingness to follow law and ethics. Digital data surveillance and other uses of AI present ongoing technological challenges for political communication and campaigns. Bots and use of natural language computer processing are not always transparent to others. Social media harassment of groups and economic barriers persist for those individuals lacking power and social capital. To some extent, site rules for **verification** and paid post promotion reify celebrity culture and social influence of known **public figures**. Once those at the top of the social strata discovered and learned how to effectively use social media communication, they widened their advantage over those lacking power, money and influence. The same technologies with low barriers to entry

that may help someone to be discovered, also serve to keep many others in relative obscurity.

Box 7.1: Case Study: *Murphy v. Twitter, Inc. (2021)*

Facts: Meghan Murphy, a Canadian writer and feminist activist, has criticized trigger warnings as a form of censorship, and she opposed transgender laws. A 2018 Twitter policy change treated use of pre-transition names and pronouns as hate speech. Responding to a labor conference position in favor of defunding a women's shelter on grounds "it limited its services to biological females," Murphy tweeted:

For the record, this 'dominatrix' was also one of those behind the push to get @bcfd to boycott and defund Vancouver Rape Relief, Canada's longest standing rape crisis center. He is ACTIVELY working to take away women's services and harm the feminist movement.

(*Murphy v. Twitter*, 2021, pp. 18–19)

The January, 2018 tweet and three tweets at the end of August led to Twitter locking her account and eventually banning her. By November, the ongoing dispute between Murphy and Twitter had escalated with additional warnings and temporary bans for the tweets: "Men aren't women, ... How are transwomen not men? What is the difference between a man and a transwoman?" (*Murphy v. Twitter*, 2021, p. 20). Twitter found the tweets to violate the Hateful Conduct Policy, and Murphy again responded:

This is fucking bullshit @twitter. I'm not allowed to say that men aren't women or ask questions about the notion of transgenderism at all anymore? That a multibillion dollar company is censoring BASIC FACTS and silencing people who ask questions about this dogma is INSANE...

(*Murphy v. Twitter*, 2021, p. 20)

Murphy's account locking and required deletion of tweets continued the next month. After additional rule violations, Murphy's account was

permanently suspended. Murphy sued Twitter under California law for breach of contract.

Legal issues: Under 47 United States Code, Section 230, online sites have immunity from third-party lawsuits. Murphy's February 2019 lawsuit claimed "breach of contract, promissory estoppel, and violation of Business and Professions Code section 17200, the unfair competition law (UCL)" (*Murphy v. Twitter*, 2021, p. 18).

While Twitter's Hateful Conduct Policy had been used since 2015, there were 2017 amendments to be the basic policy:

You may not promote violence against or directly attack or threaten other people on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or serious disease. We also do not allow accounts whose primary purpose is inciting harm towards others on the basis of these categories.

Twitter added:

Freedom of expression means little if voices are silenced because people are afraid to speak up. We do not tolerate behavior that harasses, intimidates, or uses fear to silence another person's voice. If you see something on Twitter that violates these rules, please report it to us. Twitter's examples of violations additionally suggested that context is sometimes determined by hearing "directly from the target" of the speech

(*Murphy v. Twitter*, 2021, p. 21).

Holding: A California trial court found that federal immunity applied, and the appellate court affirmed by a 3-0 vote the lower court decision. It held that blocking user content was a traditional editorial function of publishers. The decision relied upon *Barnes v. Yahoo!* (2009).

Reasoning: The appellate court relied upon **precedent** to find that Section 230:

conveys an intent to shield Internet intermediaries from the burdens associated with defending against state law claims that treat them as the publisher or speaker of third-party content, and from compelled compliance with demands

for relief that, when viewed in the context of a plaintiff's allegations, similarly assign them the legal role and responsibilities of a publisher.

(*Murphy v. Twitter*, 2021, p. 25)

The court found that the Communications Decency Act (CDA) provisions have been broadly applied: "Courts have routinely rejected a wide variety of civil claims like Murphy's that seek to hold interactive computer services liable for removing or blocking content or suspending or deleting accounts (or failing to do so) on the grounds they are barred by the CDA" (*Murphy v. Twitter*, 2021, p. 27). Other courts have been split on whether Section 230 immunity covers breach of contract or other promises, as applied under state laws. The appellate court used Ninth Circuit precedent to distinguish "Twitter's interpretation and enforcement of its own general policies rather than breach of a specific promise" (*Murphy v. Twitter*, 2021, p. 30).

The intersection of political communication and law may offer insights into how power may be exercised through the courts. In one recent defamation case, the courts revisited the issue of repeating a libel through republication. The case may have important implications for social media users sharing news content on Twitter and other platforms – especially when a story has been published a year or more ago.

Box 7.2: Case Study: Nunes v. Lizza, 12 F.4th 890 (8th Circuit, 2021)

A three-judge Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals panel reviewed the defamation claim by a prominent California congressman. The case revolved around an *Esquire* magazine article. Devin Nunes had alleged defamation and conspiracy claims against Ryan Lizza and Hearst Magazine Media, Inc., after a District Court dismissed the claim, the Appeals Court panel revived this issue of defamation through republication. Specifically, it

rejected the lower court's view that Lizza's tweet when the lawsuit was filed was not evidence of intent.

Facts: Nunes' family farm in California was sold in 2006, and his parents and brother moved to Sibley, Iowa after they purchased NuStar, a dairy farm. "According to the complaint, the farm is operated by the Congressman's family without his involvement, and the Congressman has no financial interest in the farm" (*Nunes v. Lizza*, 2021, p. 894). A 2018 *Esquire* article by Ryan Lizza was titled online as, "Devin Nunes's Family Farm Is Hiding a Politically Explosive Secret," and "Milking the System" in the print version. The article asked questions about why the family farm was sold: "Are they hiding something politically explosive?" (*Nunes v. Lizza*, 2021, p. 894). The article also claimed that the farm used knowingly used undocumented labor:

"According to two sources with firsthand knowledge, NuStar did indeed rely, at least in part, on undocumented labor. One source . . . had personally sent undocumented workers to Anthony Nunes Jr.'s farm for jobs" and "assert[ed] that the farm was aware of their status."

(*Nunes v. Lizza*, 2021, p. 894)

The article claimed the family had kept the move secret because the use of undocumented workers conflicted with Nunes' political support for Donald Trump at a time when he was campaigning to close the border with Mexico. Nunes had been chair of the House Intelligence Committee and was a key proponent of a Trump tweet that "Obama had my 'wires tapped' in Trump Tower" (*Nunes v. Lizza*, 2021, p. 895). Nunes sued Lizza and Hearst, the former owner of the magazine. The District Court rejected the defamation claim after applying the actual malice standard for **public officials'** libel lawsuit. Nunes had failed to show that Lizza and Hearst had entertained serious doubts and recklessly published the story. On appeal, the court applied Iowa defamation law that requires Nunes to show the story "resulted in injury" to his reputation (*Nunes v. Lizza*, 2021, p. 895).

Legal issues: The Appeals Court applied "defamation by implication" law when "a defendant '(1) juxtaposes a series of facts so as to imply a defamatory connection between them, or (2) creates a defamatory

implication by omitting facts” (*Nunes v. Lizza*, 2021, pp. 895–896). “The implication constitutes defamation ‘even though the particular facts are correct,’ unless it qualifies as an ‘opinion’” (*Nunes v. Lizza*, 2021, p. 896). Under Eighth Circuit precedent, “The court must determine whether an objectively reasonable reader could draw the alleged false implication from the article as a whole” (*Nunes v. Lizza*, 2021, p. 896). The Appeals Court found potential implication:

...the article states that the use of undocumented labor at dairy farms in Sibley suggests “why the Nunes family might be so secretive about the farm.” The article then explains the use of undocumented labor in the dairy industry and the complex political dynamics at work in communities that support President Trump but rely on undocumented labor. Next, the article reveals that two sources told Lizza that the farm did “rely, at least in part, on undocumented labor.” Later, the article describes Nunes as “one of Trump’s most important allies,” cites the Congressman’s “unwavering support” for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, and recounts that “Trump, King, and their allies” describe guest-worker programs for undocumented dairy workers as “amnesty.”

(*Nunes v. Lizza*, 2021, pp. 896–897)

A Lizza tweet when the lawsuit was filed may also be considered under Nunes’ actual malice claim:

The district court went further, however, and ruled that the complaint does not state a plausible allegation that Lizza acted with actual malice by republishing the article on his Twitter account after this lawsuit was filed. On this point, we respectfully disagree.

(*Nunes v. Lizza*, 2021, p. 899)

The Appeals Court applied a republication rule to the tweet:

“A speaker who repeats a defamatory statement or implication after being informed of its falsity ‘does so at the peril of generating an inference of actual malice.’ ... ‘[O]nce the publisher knows that the story is erroneous . . . the argument for weighting the scales on the side of [its] first amendment interests becomes less compelling.’”

(*Nunes v. Lizza*, 2021, p. 900) The Appeals Court treated Lizza’s tweet as republication, which has less protection in defamation lawsuits.

Decision: The unanimous three-judge Appeals Court panel reversed part of the lower court ruling and ordered “further proceedings on Nunes’s claim alleging defamation by implication, and the related claim alleging a common-law conspiracy, as to the publication of November 20, 2019” (*Nunes v. Lizza*, 2021, p. 901).

Reasoning: “Based on the article’s presentation of facts, we think the complaint plausibly alleges that a reasonable reader could draw the implication that Representative Nunes conspired to hide the farm’s use of undocumented labor” (*Nunes v. Lizza*, 2021, p. 897). The Court relied upon precedent that, It is well settled that the ‘arrangement and phrasing of apparently nonlibelous statements’ cannot hide the existence of a defamatory meaning.” ... “When a reader, ‘connecting the dots,’ could reasonably arrive at the implication, the author may be accountable... “Whether the ‘arrangement and phrasing’ of facts creates a defamatory implication depends on the particular context; an intervening section break does not necessarily avoid liability” (*Nunes v. Lizza*, 2021, p. 897).

The Appeals Court panel also quoted *Milkovich v. Lorain Journal* (1990, p. 20) that, “The First Amendment does not provide absolute protection for opinions, but ‘a statement of opinion relating to matters of public concern which does not contain a provably false factual connotation will receive full constitutional protection’” (*Nunes v. Lizza*, 2021, p. 897).

Gerstein noted that, “the court revived the lawmaker’s claim that he was libeled when a reporter linked to the story in a tweet more than a year after it was first published” (Gerstein, 2021, para. 1). Lizza later was hired by *Politico* in 2019 and “declined to comment” on the case (Gerstein, 2021, para. 6).

One curious aspect of the ruling is that it appears to open the door to lawsuits against anyone who tweeted or retweeted the original story with knowledge of Nunes’ lawsuit, and to similar claims over members of the public or those with significant social media followings tweeting or retweeting stories after learning that the subject of the story is disputing it in some way.

(Gerstein, 2021, para. 9)

The Nunes family filed a separate federal lawsuit in what some analysts suggest is merely a tactic to intimidate political critics. The legal issue of whether or not tweeting and retweeting may be treated as republication under the law could find its way to the United States Supreme Court.

NORMATIVE LAW AND ETHICS

Legal and ethical research has focused on important concerns. Businesses engaged in client work, for example, frequently are faced with contract legal issues. Non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) attempt to enforce protection of proprietary industry secrets. Similarly, non-compete employment terms and **confidentiality agreements** offer companies some level of insulation from government and public intervention (Gower, 2021). “It should be noted that the confidentiality agreement will not necessarily protect you from being required to disclose what you know before a judge” (Gower, 2021, p. 149). In general, corporate political speech in the U.S. has greater freedom of expression than purely commercial speech. In part, this rests on the theory of self-government (Bates, 2021). Meiklejohn’s mid-20th Century work, informed by Hocking, helped to define an important free expression framework:

The First Amendment is intended to facilitate political discourse; its principal concern is the rights of listeners rather than those of speakers; the government has an affirmative obligation to improve the system of free expression; and effective political deliberation requires structures and rules.

(Bates, 2021, p. 266)

Self-governance appears to be the primary justification for tolerating speech deemed offensive or even socially dangerous. In the marketplace search for truth, though, there is historic tension between private and public interest, as the government promotes freedom. “Under what has been called its positive interpretation, the First Amendment does not forbid all government action with regard to speech” (Bates, 2021, pp. 286–287). However, early social media data collection and analyses were disruptive – functioning outside of existing contracts, organizational structures and communication plans. AI, for example, was developed before governments and professional organizations had time to develop guidelines, rules and regulations. Eventually, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) framework emerged in 2018–19 “to protect citizen’s personal data” (Luttrell & Wallace,

2021, p. 188). The law became a basis for the U.S. states of California and Illinois to take leadership roles in pressing for consumer data protection that included biometric security. As devices are increasingly connected to the **Internet of Things (IoT)**, the importance of protection for behavioral data within homes, vehicles, work and other places becomes more apparent.

Mobile communication and digital media raised the stakes on real-time social media listening and engagement that is characterized by a lack of traditional information and entertainment gatekeepers. Interactive and fragmented social media channels offer users choices, but huge sites – Google, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and LinkedIn – represent most of the activity. At the same time, Reddit, Snapchat, TikTok, Clubhouse and other startups offer social media spaces for alternative rules.

Global and national leaders have tended to restrict social media communication when dissent threatens their power. In Turkey strict social media rules were forced through the political process and into law (AFP, 2020). The regulation of social media has been similar to laws that restricted broadcast and newspaper freedom: “If not, they face advertising bans, fines of up to 40 million Turkish liras (US \$5.1 million), and – crucially – bandwidth reductions of up to 90 percent, making the platforms effectively unusable” (AFP, 2020, para. 7). The president had 16.7 million @RT Erdogan Twitter followers, but he dislikes social media: “Twitter schmitter! he declared in 2014, vowing to “wipe all of these” platforms out (AFP, 2020, para. 8): “Twitter... listed Turkey – along with Russia and Japan – among the top three countries responsible for 86 percent of all requests to take down posts” (AFP, 2020, para. 12). Turkey has blocked an estimated 408,000 sites, 40,000 tweets, 10,000 YouTube videos and 6,200 Facebook posts (AFP, 2020, para. 13). At the same time, corporate and third-party social media apps, such as those created by defunct Cambridge Analytica and its collection of 87 million Facebook profiles, generated more than 100,000 documents in 68 countries, “that will lay bare the global infrastructure of an operation used to manipulate voters on ‘an industrial scale’” (Cadwalladr, 2020, para. 2). There was evidence that social media continued to be used to target vulnerable voters in the 2020 U.S. presidential election. The power of social media to help or harm people should not be lightly taken.

Site **terms of service (ToS)** end-user agreements set many of the ground-rules for social media communication behavior, but government censorship is making a comeback. We may see a struggle between official government powers and those exerted through corporate communication and the social media **platforms** preferring **moral reasoning** through self-regulation

Beyond formal law and ethics, sometimes **irrationality** of public opinion plays an important role in defining **justice**. Australian musician Nick Cave (2020)

attacked “cancel culture” and **shaming** promoted by audience members as having an “asphyxiating effect on the creative soul of a society” (Bakare, 2020, para. 1). Social media engagement may include a *disengagement* from wide-open public discussion that makes many users on Twitter and elsewhere uncomfortable. Use of #cancelculture within social conversation judgment may help define political differences between liberals and conservatives (Bond, 2020).

At the same time, wealthy people have the power to close a publication, if they can find the right lawsuit to back. Silicon Valley tech billionaire Peter Thiel supported a successful Florida invasion of privacy case after Gawker posted a portion of a sex tape (Sorkin, 2016). Ultimately, Gawker was closed after paying millions to Terry Bollea – he had been known as wrestler Hulk Hogan (*Bollea v. Gawker Media*, 2012). Thiel had waged a war against Gawker for outing homosexuality. Gawker.com later reopened under new management.

U.S. First Amendment law and policies were built upon British common law marketplace of ideas concepts about core political speech freedoms. Robust social media communication may be filled with contentious political speech, polarized opinions and personal attacks on speakers. It is not clear where, when or how to draw the line between protected speech and content that warrants government or corporate controls.

Lin’s (2003) Interactive Communication Technology Adoption Model attempted to frame new media technologies within a broad set of factors that may interact – including social diffusion and adoption at all psychological and sociological levels. While law and regulation could be placed within system factors, social and use factors also may influence ethical decision-making. The Lin (2003) technology adoption model, strongly influenced by Rogers (1995), cuts across micro and macro levels of social behaviors. It is possible to use the framework and deepen it by digging into law, regulation and ethics within these systems.

Social media platforms have become arbiters of appropriate communication and gatekeepers that may block content, demand deletion, or ban accounts. As Facebook has discovered, however, content moderation is difficult to scale, may be impossible to square with the First Amendment, and generally fall into three options:

- (1) requirements that platforms host users and content with which they disagree;
- (2) modifications to Section 230, a federal statute that currently immunizes platforms from traditional speech torts, such as defamation, arising from user-generated content; and (3) limits on how platforms recommend or rank content to users.

(Wiley, 2021, pp. 1–2)

Wiley (2021) pointed to judicial support for Twitter’s blocking and banning of the @realDonaldTrump account for violation of site rules (*Knight First Amend. Inst. at Columbia Univ. v. Trump*, 2019; *Biden v. Knight First Amend. Inst. at Columbia Univ.*, 2021). As Wiley (2021) concludes, U.S. congressional review of Section 230 site immunity from third-party lawsuits may be focused on the brute power of Facebook, Twitter, Google and others. Nevertheless, the exercise of publisher decisions cannot be replaced with government editorial decisions that run counter to the First Amendment and British common law limitations on censorship. In general, government action must be narrowly tailored to advance non-speech goals, or otherwise it will be found vague and overbroad under U.S. Supreme Court precedent. Political speech is at the core of First Amendment meaning and protection within a marketplace of ideas.

In a dramatic departure from U.S. law, an Australian court found that media companies may be held civilly liable for Facebook page comments (Disis & Whiteman, 2021). The High Court of Australia rejected an appeal based upon use of Facebook functions. In *Fairfax Media v. Voller* (2021) newspapers maintained public Facebook pages and invited comments. Some of these were defamatory. Under the Defamation Act (2005), the tort of defamation defined publication and innocent dissemination. However, “The Court of Appeal was correct to hold that the acts of the appellants in facilitating, encouraging and thereby assisting the posting of comments by the third-party Facebook users rendered them publishers of those comments” (point 55). From a CMC context, it is disturbing that news media would be held responsible for defamatory comments posted in response to their news stories. This model ignores historic marketplace speech theories. While the case does not represent an illegal common law **prior restraint**, it introduces potentially dangerous subsequent punishment in a libel suit that could lead to a chilling effect of abandoning Facebook and other social media sites.

Meanwhile, despite U.S. First Amendment legal protection, the government continues to use its massive resources to spy on the public. For example, after the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol, a covert postal service unit – States Postal Inspection Service Internet Covert Operations Program (iCOP) – “sent bulletins to law enforcement agencies around the country on how to view social media posts that had been deleted,” and “described its scrutiny of posts on the fringe social media network Wimkin” (Woodruff Swan, 2021, para. 2). The iCOP records showed that law enforcement “planned ahead” for “a mass casualty event,” if the #StopTheSteal movement became violent (Woodruff Swan, 2021, para. 5). The surveillance evidence included “tweets from two users” (Woodruff Swan, 2021, para. 6):

One of the tweets, from Czech Republic-based company Intelligence X, announced the creation of a system for people to share pictures and videos from the Capitol attack. Another tweet, from an account called “@donk_enby,” says it includes a link to every Parler post made during the riot.

(Woodruff Swan, 2021, para. 7)

As Amazon’s AWS cloud service unit denied service to Parler after the attack, the agency scrambled to archive available posts for use in law enforcement investigation of crimes. The iCOP bulletins suggested that the data could also be used for future unrelated criminal investigations for years to come. While iCOP was originally designed to protect mail carriers, it appeared that their domestic surveillance program reached far beyond the mandate under U.S. law. Social media site users leave a digital footprint of their communication that can be indefinitely stored by companies and governments. Until recently, users have had little control over their personal data. Some state laws, such as in California, have begun to offer U.S. users legal recourse against companies that fail to be transparent about the storage of user-deleted data. One regulatory tactic to watch comes from countries targeting the largest digital and social corporations with fines. A Russian court, for example, fined Google about \$98.4 million and Facebook Meta \$27.2 million for not deleting banned content:

Russian state communications watchdog Roskomnadzor said Google and Meta were specifically accused of violating the ban on distributing content that promotes extremist ideology, insults religious beliefs and encourages dangerous behavior by minors, among other things.

(Pavolva, 2021, paras 2, 6)

A regulatory agency identified thousands of Instagram posts and Google Internet search results – including about “drug abuse, weapons and explosives and extremist views” (Pavolva, 2021, para. 9). Clearly, many countries around the globe envision a filtered Internet and social media communication. Further, transparent speaker identification and content ownership could bring more accountability for what is posted. Legal and ethical responses to the powers of surveillance capital tend to focus more on data **privacy** than the concerns related to information verification that underpins global justice (Zuboff, 2019; Christians, 2019). Perhaps blockchain verified data will help usher in a decline in unethical social media communication. Meanwhile, in the absence of new federal law, state attorneys general continue to pressure the FTC and other agencies to regulate social media for health and safety of children and teens.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Should social media sites, such as Twitter, continue to have Section 230 immunity from lawsuits? If so, should this be narrower than current law? Why or why not?
2. Do you trust the marketplace of ideas to protect society from misinformation and disinformation? Why or why not?
3. How could private industry or government create a new free expression system that responds to the challenges of the Internet?

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Social Media Processes and Effects

“We want to give a clearer sense of what we think is problematic but not worth removing.”

Jason Hirsch, Facebook (2021)

Facebook’s newsfeed algorithms are secret, but the company attempted to clarify its Content Distribution Guidelines that *demote* specific forms of content (Heath, 2021). “That process, which relies heavily on **machine learning (ML)** technology to automatically detect problematic content, effectively throttles the reach of offending posts and comments without the author knowing” (Heath, 2021, para. 2). **Clickbait** or **spam**, for example, may be filtered through demotion rather than being deleted by the platform. In an era of health misinformation, Facebook has used frequent warning labels and content demotion to draw less attention to problematic posts. In effect, social media companies became mass media, and with this followed the need to be gatekeepers of information.

Development of mass media – such as newspapers, radio and television, and cable channels – set the stage for understanding how media messages spread across audiences and create an opportunity for influencing them. By the time the

Internet and social media arrived, individuals had developed active audience tendencies that could either limit effectiveness or amplify salient cultural messages. Briefly, social scientists in the 20th Century conceptualized models, theories and measurement tools to study media. The so-called limited effects paradigm posited the power of individuals to mediate messages. This was contrasted with a later re-emergence of powerful effects hypotheses. For example, cultivation analysis suggested that long-term measurement of effects would show the massive power of media. For social media communication and its daily and nearly continuous heavy use by sometimes addicted participants, there may be quite powerful effects given time spent. On the other hand, people who rarely use, for example Facebook, would not be as likely to be exposed to political content – news, opinion or advertising.

Media theorists have been able to measure the power of agenda-setting and building over time. These effects are likely to be more dominant within traditional media channels than the more fragmented social media communication spaces. The framing of millions of messages at any given time depends upon a certain level of focus for attention on **viral** or **trending** content. These bursts, though, often are replaced by a new story. Fundamental attitude, opinion or behavioral changes on social issues clearly have origins within media channels and personal influence. Experiences may change views about race, gender and other evolving political norms. The formation and re-formation of public opinion also includes knowledge gaps that widen between those consuming information and others removed from it. Research continues to explore questions about media power, long-term cultivation and how social movement reflects an ever-changing context for political issues, candidates and circumstances.

CASE STUDY: #BLACKLIVESMATTER SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

Social media communication (SMC) and the use of mobile phones by activists helped engage and amplify prominent cases of racist police injustices, such as #GeorgeFloyd, and this over time helped shift public opinion for those predisposed to open reevaluation. The #BlackLivesMatter, #BlackTwitter and other related **hashtags** and **hashflags** operated within growing social networks (Adams, 2015). Journalistic gatekeeping gave way to social movements' use of Twitter, TikTok and other channels to set agendas for salient content (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). In the fight for share of voice (SoV), **hashjacking** of popular hashtags by political actors may happen.

Journalists traditionally had roles, rituals and processes (Tunstall, 1971). Frequently, historic news gatekeeping favored the status quo over social change.

Journalists are taught and reminded to avoid expressing opinions on Twitter and other platforms (AP, 2020, 2013). “AP employees must refrain from declaring their views on contentious public issues in any public forum . . .” (AP, 2020, 2013, para. 20). The emergence of fake news continues to be a problem. Political communication challenged news media to take on the role of fact checker: “...the right wing of the media ecosystem behaves precisely as the echo-chamber models predict – exhibiting high insularity, susceptibility to information cascades, rumor and conspiracy theory...” (Benkler, Faris & Roberts 2018, p. 73). As online news emerged as a dominant force, it should not be surprising that contested political **narratives** about racial injustice and violence would spark potential social change (Hacıyakupoglu & Zhang, 2015; Rosenberg & Egbert, 2011; McCombs, Holbert, Kiousis & Wanta, 2011, p. 16). Survey research data suggest that *some* social media users rethink political views based upon their engagement with others (Anderson, 2016), and this may be related to cultural sensemaking about contemporary public issues that challenge society (Baran & Davis, 2006).

#BlackLivesMatter protests raised new political voices through use of hashtags, such as #SandraBland and #GeorgeFloyd. The deaths of young blacks across the U.S. at the hands of police officers using excessive force was evidence for the need to reform local police operations. It is fair to say that Twitter helped focus political communication and the call for change (Lipschultz, 2020, 2021; Adams, 2015). Chaffee & Metzger (2001) predicted that media communication would be more interactive, and *mass personal communication* is one way to explain the power of political movements (French & Bazarova, 2017). Social network sites connect people to new ideas, and this may reconstruct news, political realities and behavior (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Berger & Luckmann, 1980; Tuchman, 1978). Friend groups, for example, may increase partisanship when news content either supports closeness or the breaking of social bonds (Weeks & Holbert, 2013).

TRUSTED COMMUNICATION

Advertisers, marketers and PR practitioners leveraged political influence, and trust has been social capital that amplifies social media communication (Lipschultz, 2021; Edelman, 2020; Luttrell, 2016). Fans repeat engaging celebrity content that expresses opinion about the need for racial justice in the face of hate, harassment, white nationalism, anti-Semitism, racism and gender discrimination. The diffusion of new ideas happens when some new ideas are adopted by enough people to create a majority political view (Rogers, 1995). At the same time, governments try to maintain control over messages that threatened their power to manage the status quo (Gambrell, 2020). Increasingly polarized political debate during the global pandemic followed

an emerging landscape of propaganda designed to exploit fears (Meisenzahl, 2020; Köver & Reuter, 2019). Sticky social media content within a marketplace of attention helps define popular and unpopular audience ideas (Webster, 2014).

Newer social media, such as TikTok, spread truthful health professional content at the same time that the highly tuned individual profile algorithm delivers content that keeps users on the site for longer than healthy amounts of time (Brennan, 2020). TikTok has quickly become the most visited website ahead of more established properties: 1. TikTok; 2. Google; 3. Facebook; 4. Microsoft; 5. Apple; 6. Amazon; 7. Netflix; 8. YouTube; 9. Twitter; and 10. WhatsApp (Brooks, 2021, para. 8). Among social media platforms, the list shows where crowds gather: 1. TikTok; 2. Facebook; 3. YouTube; 4. Twitter; 5. Instagram; 6. Snapchat; 7. Reddit; 8. Pinterest; 9. LinkedIn; and 10. Quora (Brooks, 2021, para. 10). It should not be a surprise that these are the online spaces where political issues are contested in the struggle between status quo powers, such as governments and corporations, and change agents upending assumptions. It is likely that we will see the powerful pay, for example TikTok, to promote organically viral content that supports their vested interests and future direction. The mix of power, wealth and social trends would be predicted to drive change.

This can turn social media communication into a massive surveillance infrastructure. The Clearview AI police surveillance tool added to data privacy concerns through the use of facial recognition to identify protesters from posted social media photographs (Hill, 2020). The social media challenge is to identify normative communication boundaries for disclosure of information that supports groups engaged in a political struggle (Petronio, 2002). Commodification or disinformation actors, though, may misuse technologies in ways that damage communities (Rheingold, 1993). The potential for “imagined communities” within social network structures, in part, may be magnified by the comfortable social sharing of memes (Welsh, 2019; Hunsinger & Senft, 2014). New tools allow users to connect with others through perceived media richness and propinquity (Sherblom, 2020). If society can be seen as “fragile,” then social media communication technology also allows online communities to create “hope of economic, political, and cultural unity” (Carey, 1992, p. 8). In theory, **network visualization** should be a window into communication behaviors on Twitter and other platforms.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE REFORM

Twitter developed as a social media space for breaking news produced by traditional and new media voices. Social media content about race became an outlet for historic frustration expressed by people of color over gatekeeping and

agenda-setting that ignored race and politics (Entman & Rojecki, 2001; Heider, 2000; Kellstedt, 2002). Breaking local television news, for example, often focused on black criminal suspects and conflicts with whites, and crime coverage followed predictable themes:

(1) personalized through perpetrators and victims; (2) dramatic, conflict-filled, controversial and violent; (3) actual and concrete; (4) novel or deviant; and (5) linked to issues of ongoing concern to media.

(Jamieson & Campbell, 2001, p. 41).

The Graber (2006) event-oriented news model also may be applied to the spread of social media content:

Event: Visual Scene and Social Media Real-time Description

Mediated Possible Causes of the Event in Relation to Others

Placement Within Larger Social, Cultural and Political Context

Social movements may help transform the political environment through social media communication patterns and structures (Coban, 2016; Duggan, 2016). The social sharing of news structure and tone may diffuse a general acceptance of event facts and help persuade online community members about politics (DeAngelo & Yegiyen, 2019; Milburn, 1991; Lang & Lang, 1984).

#BLACKLIVES MATTER DATA

The #BlackLivesMatter social movement, police #BlueLivesMatter response and Donald Trump's #MAGA (Make America Great Again) and #AllLivesMatter hashtags reflected *polarized* social and political movement content that continued to be used in 2022. Social network analysis (SNA) found partisan **filter bubbles** within subgroup crowds (Hansen, Shneiderman, & Smith, 2011). Clustered connection of like-minded social media users expressing views about criminal justice and police reform may be linked because of fundamental views about race within networked communication (Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman & Himelboim, 2014; Himelboim, McCreery, & Smith, 2013). Six social network types offer a method for interpreting group differences on racial issues:

- Polarized Crowd – two large and dense groups with little overlap, such as Democrat-Republican. The political parties differ on how to respond to racial injustice.

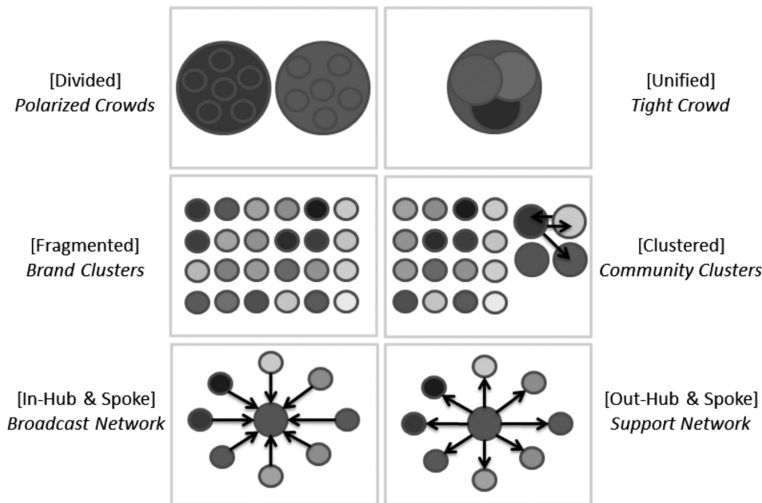


FIGURE 8.1 *Six Twitter Structures. Courtesy Smith et al. (2014)*

- Tight Crowd – highly interconnected accounts with few isolated, such as Black Twitter. Homogenous subgroups may form an echo chamber to interpret issues.
- Brand Clusters – well-known products and services that try to capitalize on events. Social marketing sometimes rides the waves of social change.
- Community Clusters – conversation about popular topics, such as within a local urban center. Participants, for example at Ferguson, Missouri protests, used Twitter to communicate with each other.
- Broadcast Network – commentary and breaking news from local and national media outlets. Thought leadership is exercised by those with large audiences interested in opinions or sharing of new information.
- Support Network – customer service hub and spoke structure, such as protesters and activists seeking help during a conflict. Social stress often leads individuals to seek professional assistance.

(Smith, Rainie, Shneiderman & Himelboim, 2014, paras 8–13)

The 2016 U.S. presidential election year clearly was a complex mix, as reflected in Twitter’s top hashtag list that included the Olympics, politics and entertainment: 1. #Rio2016, 2. #Election2016, 3. #PokemonGo, 4. #Euro2016, 5. #Oscars,

6. #Brexit, 7. #BlackLivesMatter, 8. #Trump, 9. #RIP, and 10. #GameofThrones (Kottasova, 2016). The rise in use of #BlackLivesMatter during protests in Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore reflected political change (Cobbina, 2019). “The depth of anger and frustration among protesters was palpable, as they roused a sleeping nation and urged it to come to terms with the many, largely Black civilians who are murdered by police” (Cobbina, 2019, p. 73). Twitter was key in mobilizing protests. For example, #Ferguson appeared in more than six million tweets (Cobbina, 2019, p. 95). The use of mobile phone video “played a key role in prompting public outcry,” as tweets “created a sense of urgency and immediacy, which galvanized thousands to mobilize against police violence” (Cobbina, 2019, p. 96).

Social network analysis of Twitter data collected by the Social Media Research Foundation (2020) using its NodeXL mapping tool, offers a window into active content sharing. For example, the #BlackLivesMatter and #BLM hashtags in the weeks leading to the U.S. 2020 presidential election were consistently related to #Antifa, #DefundThePolice and #BidenHarris2020. In one 15-hour period alone, a large crowd gathered on Twitter to keep social and political pressure on criminal justice reform.

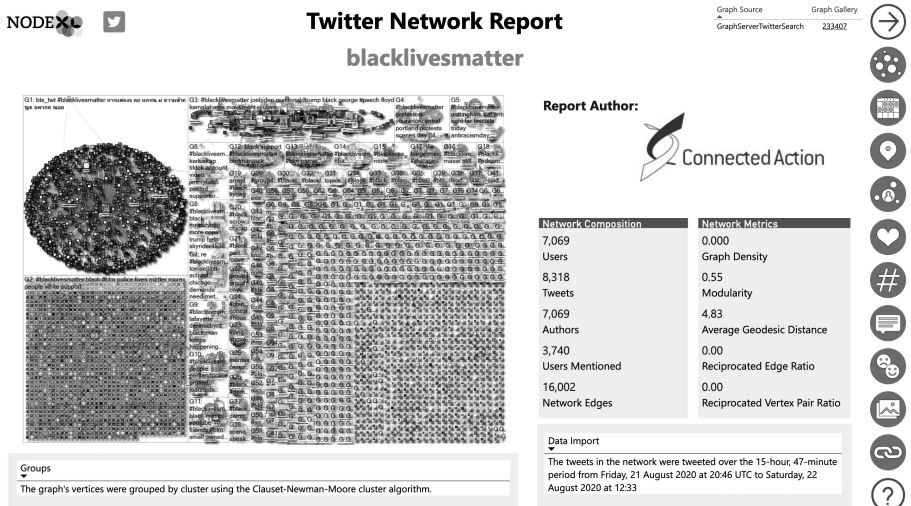
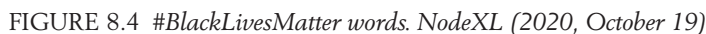


FIGURE 8.2 #BlackLivesMatter network. NodeXL (Social Media Research Foundation, 2020, October 19) <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiYjNiZTUwYTMtMDZhOC00OGFhLW12MzQtYmVmZjcyNmRjOGYzIiwidCI6IjI5ZDRjMTFjLTA1N2MtNDg3Zi04ZmRhLWU4NmQ1OTkzOWU2NCIsImMiOiJz9&embedImagePlaceholder=true>



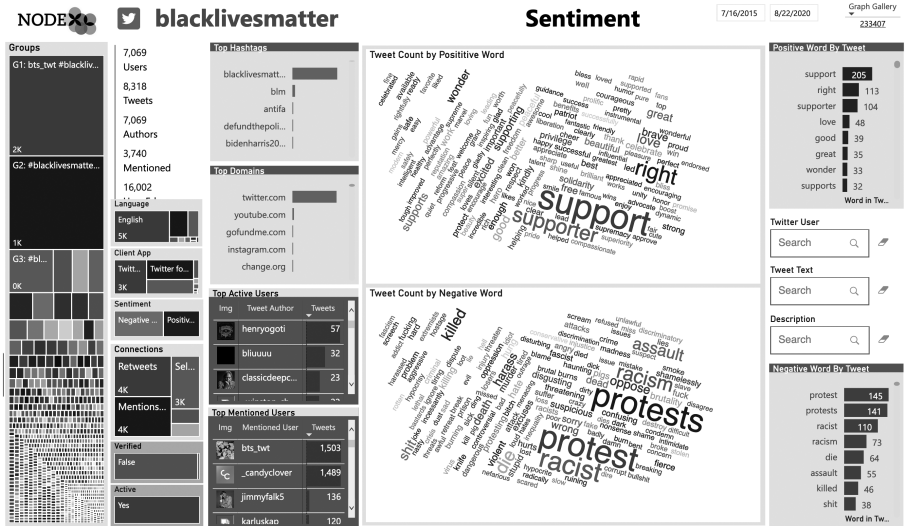


FIGURE 8.5 #BlackLivesMatter sentiment. NodeXL (Social Media Research Foundation 2020, 2020, October 19)

The online #BlackLivesMatter conversation was global and included North and South America, Africa, Europe, Australia and Asia.

Most importantly, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag data shared connection with SMC that was tagged #JusticeForGeorgeFloyd, #JusticeForBreonnaTaylor and related salient protest expression.

A computer-coded sentiment analysis revealed that positive words in the tweets most often included the words: support, right, supporter, love, good, great, wonder and supports. Importantly, negative sentiment words were descriptive of ongoing events and conditions: protest, protests, racist, racism, die, assault, killed and shit.

The ongoing connection between #BlackLivesMatter and #BLM on Twitter and other social movement hashtags – #BlackTwitter, #JusticeForGeorgeFloyd and #JusticeForBreonnaTaylor – constitute powerful online persuasion that does not allow criminal justice reform to drop from the mainstream news agenda. The use of #BlackLivesMatter insulates a networked conversation within four structures: tight, community, broadcast and support clusters. The hashtag and related protest activities tend to avoid brand and polarized clustered social network communication.

INTERPRETATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Social media communication (SMC) offered new tools for political activists to pressure status quo powers by shifting media and political agendas. Specifically, the use of mobile smartphones to collect, distribute, engage and amplify obvious cases of racist police injustices moved public opinion. The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag operated within growing social networks on Twitter and other sites, and TikTok youth advanced the cause of promoting reform and justice. News reports, though, identified how some governments around the world were spying on activists that were using TikTok (AP, 2019a). Social analyses help us discover underlying group differences within the larger available data.

Research about crime news on TV makes linkages to genre, gender, sexuality, police, patriotism and optimism versus pessimism. New technologies and new competition are dramatically impacting the formation of public opinion. Episodic media coverage has become augmented by long-term social media communication on Twitter, TikTok and other channels that cannot be managed by status quo agents of power and oppression. Webster (2014) noted that polarization and division actually serve a market segmentation that may aid commercial interests: “In the extreme, they portend a society largely devoid of a common

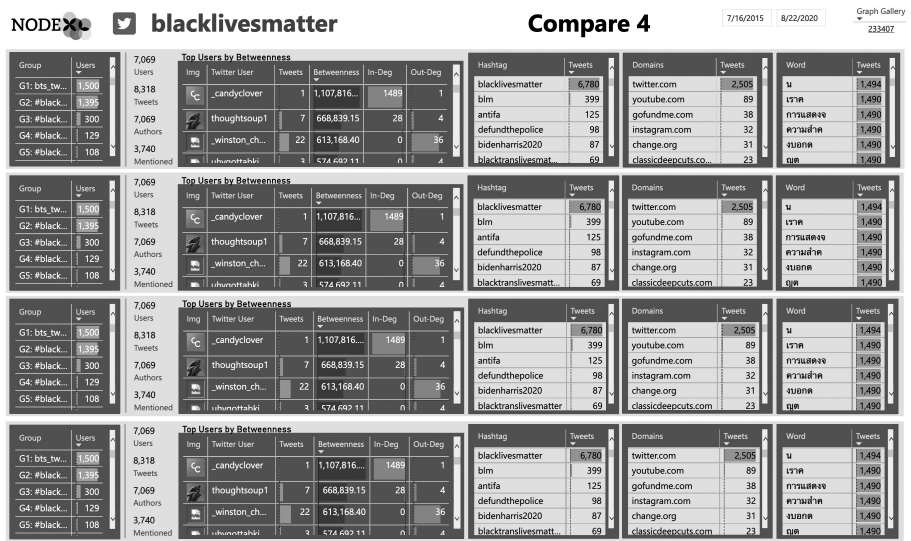


FIGURE 8.6 #BlackLivesMatter groups. NodeXL (Social Media Research Foundation 2020, 2020, October 19)

public sphere and polarized into isolated, even hostile, groups” (Webster, 2014, p. 19). The danger of SMC feeding anti-democratic activism on the political left and right instead of fixing a broken criminal justice system remains a potential outcome. Social media communication may be a democratic tool, but these platforms also invite a vocal minority with the opportunity to distort and manipulate perception of majority opinions – even triggering hostility or violence that could create a spiral of silence (Mohammad, 2020; Gearhart & Zhang, 2014; Noelle-Neumann, 1984).

Social networks also may increase learning about criminal justice reforms through development of media and information literacy skills via online community-based social influence leadership that helps people to identify with content (Hunsinger & Senft, 2014; Huffaker, 2010; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Koh, Kim, Butler & Bock, 2007). Cultivation of authentic online communities may create lasting relational communication, but the dangers of manipulation persist through the spread of anti-democratic disinformation (Rheingold, 1993).

Facebook has billions of global users (Hutchinson, 2019), and 86 percent of young Americans aspire to be a social media influencer (Min, 2019). We exchange our personal data on these sites for free access in what has been called surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and TokTok may be more about the medium *as* the message (Savage, 2011) than moral discourse (Baym, 2009). We need the application of communication theories and concepts (Severin & Tankard, 2001) to better understand racial divides about criminal justice reform. By using SMC to tell untold stories, the hope is that we will learn to find commonality through shared values of justice, truth and ethics (Deggan, 2013).

The fundamental social media communication shift toward interactivity and online communities disrupts the status quo for racist criminal justice systems that disproportionately arrest and send black men to prison. The emerging #BlackLivesMatter narrative over excessive force and deaths counters traditional police management of the news agenda. Police accountability and transparency advocates can be seen within the larger SMC context of social media authenticity.

TRUST AND TRANSPARENCY

Accountability, particularly by policy agencies, continues to be a major racial justice issue within the United States. Social conflicts also spread to businesses and universities. Public intellectual Cornel West made news in 2021 when he published a letter blasting former employer Harvard University.

Box 8.1: Cornel West Tweets Harvard Letter

Cornel West (2021) tweeted his resignation letter from Harvard’s divinity school, as he left to rejoin the faculty at Union Theological Seminary in New York City as Dietrich Bonhoeffer Chair (Jaschik, 2021). The professor is widely-known through his media appearances and has more than one million Twitter followers.



This is my candid letter of resignation to my Harvard Dean. I try to tell the unvarnished truth about the decadence in our market-driven universities! Let us bear witness against this spiritual rot!

June 30th, 2021

I hope and pray you and your family are well! This summer is a scorcher! Here is my brief and candid letter of resignation: “How sad it is to see our beloved Harvard Divinity School in such decline and decay. The disarray of a scattered curriculum, the disenchantment of talented yet deferential faculty, and the disorientation of precious students loom large. When I arrived four years ago - with a salary less than what I received 15 years earlier and with no tenure status after being a University Professor at Harvard and Princeton - I hoped and prayed I could still end my career with some semblance of intellectual intensity and personal respect. How wrong I was! With a few glorious and glaring exceptions, the shadow of Jim Crow was cast in its new glittering form expressed in the language of superficial diversity: all my courses were subsumed under Afro-American Religious Studies, including those on Existentialism, American Democracy and The Conduct of Life, no possible summer salary alongside the lowest increase possible every year. Yet I delivered two convocation addresses and one commencement speech in four years. I was promised a year sabbatical but could only take one semester in practice. And to witness a faculty enthusiastically support a candidate for tenure then timidly defer to a rejection based on the Harvard administration’s hostility to the Palestinian cause was disgusting. We all knew the mendacious reasons given had nothing to do with academic standards. When my committee recommended a tenure review - also rejected by the Harvard administration - I knew my academic achievements and student teaching meant far less than their political prejudices. Even my good friends in the Afro-American and African Studies Department were paralyzed, given their close relations to the administration. And after teaching extra courses, including five courses in one year, this silence continued. When the announcement of the death of my beloved Mother appeared in the regular newsletter, I received two public replies (just as that of my colleague Dr. Jacqueline Olza Cooke-Rivers who received none when her blessed

FIGURE 8.7 *Cornel West tweeted an open letter critical of Harvard University.*
Cornel West, @CornelWest

"This is my candid letter of resignation to my Harvard Dean. I try to tell unvarnished truth about the decadence in our market-driven universities! Let us bear witness against this spiritual rot!"

West shared his entire letter below the tweet.

It would not be considered best practice to attack a former employer with words, such as "spiritual rot," "superficial diversity," and "narcissistic academic professionalism" (West, 2021, paras 4–10). However, West has made a career by being outspoken on social and political issues, and his use of Twitter to speak directly to followers includes a commonly-used political tactic. The tweet attracted national news media attention that further spread his message. This was the second time he left Harvard. In 2002, he famously left a tenured position over a public dispute with the university president.

West's work as a political activist has focused upon racial issues, gender, economic and social class, and he is considered a theological socialist. He has held positions at major universities in the United States and France. West is known for a radio program, Hollywood movie appearances, hip hop album readings and frequent cable television news interviews. His work centers on U.S. racism, racial justice and continuing threats from white supremacy movements. West was a key activist during the 2014 #Ferguson Missouri protests that followed the shooting of Michael Brown – one of the early racial protests within the United States that leveraged the growing power of Twitter.

Political advertising control by Facebook is another problem during and outside of campaigns. Facebook has shifted to a policy of banning political ads near elections, but research discovered that the company has ineffective regulation (Chappell, 2021; Cyber Security for Democracy, 2021). For example, campaigns frequently were able to sell political gear within shopping advertising. Memes and graphics also may be missed by Facebook filters used around the world. Further, the traditional lines between news, information, opinion, misinformation and disinformation, public relations, advertising and marketing continue to blur within political communication on social media platforms.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you think social media sites, such as TikTok, will be used in the future to advance racial and social justice issues?
2. What are the potential limitations of social media communication in advancing social progress?
3. Why have traditional agents of power both used social media sites, such as Twitter, and also called for limits on online freedom of expression?

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Media and Information Literacy

“We’re not just talking about political polarization just in the abstract, but it has these very specific consequences which we are seeing basically eroding aspects of democracy and civil relationships among people and trust in institutions and so forth”

Paul Barrett, deputy director, NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights (2021)

Political polarization is reflected within social media content, and some have concluded that platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have failed to self-regulate. Proposed legislation called for the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) “to draft and enforce new standards for industry conduct, and pass legislation mandating more disclosure about the inner workings of platforms” (Klar, 2021, para. 6). It is unclear, though, that transparency alone could magically transform Twitter into a safe space, or that such a move would serve democracy. Government filtering or banning polarized political content, however, would run counter to First Amendment norms of free speech – even if the threats simply created a chilling effect on the social media companies.

Trust gaps are at the heart of social media communication issues (Bloomstein, 2021). Users launching the #DeleteFacebook movement and some of their elected U.S. representatives clearly do not trust Facebook and its new parent company Meta that owns Instagram, Messenger and WhatsApp. Similar mistrust can be found for Twitter, as some left for Parler and other sites following the account bans during the 2020–2021 political upheaval and global pandemic. At the same time, digital media and other entrepreneurial technology innovation have become increasingly important in our daily lives (Lipschultz, 2020; Gershon, 2017). It remains unclear whether or not the rhetoric of corporate social responsibility (CSR) will translate into largescale concern for social media users (Pompper, 2015). It seems more likely that early theorists correctly predicted a technological culture that controls peoples' lives, as well as political polarization of culture wars (Shepard & Culver, 2018; Postman, 1992)

Donald Trump's use of social media between 2015 and 2021 generated questions about political influence through social (Pérez-Curiel & Limón Naharro, 2019). "The visibility, speed and capacity for immediate response characterizing social networks have become factors that multiply the effect of political influence" (Pérez-Curiel & Limón Naharro, 2019, p. 58). Some of Trump's persuasive and propaganda success on Twitter, for example, was found to be related to his marketing strategies:

Due to the success of this discursive format, the media reproduce the persuasion and propaganda strategies in their front-page headlines, evincing yet again their interest in reproducing not only the topics covered in Trump's tweets, but also the language characterising his personality.

(Pérez-Curiel & Limón Naharro, 2019, p. 71)

Clarke and Grieve found that Trump's tweets evolved relating to role changes between 2009 and 2018:

We interpreted these four dimensions as representing variation in conversational, campaigning, engaged, and advisory styles of discourse. We also tracked how the tweets in the corpus varied over time across these four dimensions, to see how the style of the account changed. All four dimensions showed clear temporal patterns and most major shifts in style align to a small number of indisputably important points in the Trump timeline, especially the 2011 Birther controversy, the 2012 election, his 2015 declaration, his 2016 Republican nomination, the 2016 election, and his 2017 inauguration, as well as the seasons of his television series *The Apprentice*.

(Clarke and Grieve (2019, p. 19)

Communication style, campaign messaging and attacks on others appeared to vary over time. Trump's "toxic masculinity" reflected "a patriarchal and paternalistic discourse" that was "authoritative" (Pizarro-Sirera, 2020, pp. 166–167). Social media have become ubiquitous within U.S. and global culture, but one important study found that increased Facebook use was negatively associated with political knowledge (Cacciatore et al., 2018). One possible explanation is that, "we may be observing a displacement effect where social media is replacing more traditional outlets for information" (Cacciatore et al., 2018, p. 420). The impact of social media on politics reflects a relatively small slice of significant studies at the intersection of mediated interpersonal communication and digital media communication.

HCI, CMC AND SMC

The dawn of Internet communication quickly followed with scholarly work in Internet studies that leveraged mediated interpersonal communication characteristics related to identity presentation of self, flow of interaction, and potential of online community-building (Barnes, 2003). **Human Computer Interaction (HCI)** and computer-mediated communication (CMC) reflect a desire to experience **virtual communities** via transport to a different space, cultivate an online presence, and use sharing to build more ideal relationships. Most researchers follow this classic definition:

... web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.

(boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211)

Idealism within HCI and CMC, though, presents conceptual challenges. A basic understanding of public profiles, sharing and connection, however, simplifies known social network structures, links and the importance of connection (Burnett & Marshall, 2003). It can be said that "the very core" of online behavior is connection because of "incredible cultural consumption *and* cultural production," (p. 59) and sometimes "shifting boundaries" fueled by anonymous communication, narcissistic self-promotion and other concerns (Burnett & Marshall, 2003, pp. 78–80).

Our ability to visualize, for example, Twitter data and "see" patterns may be traced to early group studies (Hansen, Shneiderman, & Smith, 2011). Online communities may be explored through their "tight interconnectivity" or "clusters"

that represent “group identity” (Rodrigues, Milic-Frayling, Smith, Shneiderman, & Hansen, 2011, para. 2). A social network ultimately leads researchers to the need for identification of group leaders – social media accounts that exercise some form of personal influence within specific topics (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009). Popular social media voices can be identified, compared to those in relative isolation at the periphery of a group cluster, and analyzed for opinion leadership in the diffusion of ideas (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Rogers, 1995). Social networks may depict meaningful boundaries within mediated communication settings or open doors to pushing through them (Rheingold, 1993; Jones, 1998). Relational communication and **impression** management is likely to be impacted by traditional hierarchy and power. Additionally, motivation for engagement is often driven by need gratification (Sundar & Limperos, 2013). One explanation for online popularity of social media icons, such as Donald Trump, is that followers use social networks to participate in “imagined communities” that, “now enable significant parts of our social imagination, and with that significant parts of our social memory” (Hunsinger, 2014, p. 9). Constructed social realities are a form of reproduction through narrative storytelling practices that optimize audience interest and participation. An emerging research interest can be found within the examination of social presence.

MEDIA RICHNESS AND SOCIAL PRESENCE REVISITED

The Sherblom (2020) textbook is one example of scholars organizing CMC studies around constraints, such as media richness, and experience of social presence. He divides this into three important definitions:

Presence is the experience of being immersed in the medium.

Social presence identifies a feeling of connectedness for relational closeness to another person within the medium.

Proximity describes the consequences for relational closeness of choosing a medium through which to communicate.

(Sherblom, 2020, p. 63)

So-called “proximity theory” suggests that relational closeness depends upon “bandwidth,” simple information, synchronous communication, “skills,” and a lack of rules and choices (Sherblom, 2020, p. 83).

Memes, for example, may be used to spread ideas through humor, as the “original form... also spawns user-created derivatives” (Shifman, 2013, p. 362). The iteration

over time and digital space again reflects social reproduction techniques, “pattern” and some “more organized cultural trajectories” (Shifman, 2013, p. 372). The sharing behavior may either spark fresh communication or social silence within a context of political controversy (Gearhart & Zhang, 2014). #BlackLivesMatter, for example, is a social movement that has sparked a willingness to speak about racial injustices within contested social media spaces. Activists may use social media communication to expose corruption (Coban, 2016; Dencik & Leister, 2015). Popular public concern about lack of objective truth within polarized social media crowds presents a need to focus on credibility and trust of information.

CREDIBILITY, TRUST AND MISINFORMATION

Message credibility and source trust have become global issues amid democratic concerns about repression, disinformation and election insecurity (Shackelford, Raymond, Stemler & Loyle, 2020). Foreign and domestic threats to democracy leverage the power of global social media channels. “Generally conceived, digital repression is the coercive use of information and communication technologies by the state to exert control over potential and existing challenges and challengers” (Shackelford, Raymond, Stemler & Loyle, 2020, p. 1762). Bad actors may manipulate the political process through surveillance and monitoring, “advanced biometric monitoring, misinformation campaigns, and state-based hacking” (Shackelford, Raymond, Stemler & Loyle, 2020, pp. 1762–1763). Despite national and international efforts to respond, there is no way to completely “safeguard democracies against the full range of threats” (Shackelford, Raymond, Stemler & Loyle, 2020, p. 1808).

Cyberculture was an early Internet concept that drew from science fiction and sometimes presented a dark technological future. At times advertising, marketing (**key performance indicators, KPIs**) and public relations digital practices blurred and presented a social media world of “colliding” personal, professional and brand posts (Quesenberry, 2021, p. 411). Employee content may be regulated by company social media policies:

Not only should social media activity not hurt the company, but many companies today also see active personal social media use as a medium of advocacy for their brand. Consider that anything that is posted may impact professional image as a potential employee at another company or organization.

(Quesenberry, 2021, p. 413)

As we move deeper into the Internet of Things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI) of **natural language processing (NLP)** chat bots and augmented reality (AR), it will

become more difficult for practitioners to set appropriate social media boundaries unless blockchain is adopted as a means to regulate social, legal and ethical communication boundaries. Some educators are promoting stronger media and information literacy emphases, but this is a constant and evolving challenge amid technological innovation and entrepreneurship that strives for change. Social media communication users should exercise critical thinking skills that involve deconstruction of messages through language skills and deeper levels of information processing within real-time social media conversation.

Box 9.1: Healthy Skepticism

News consumer reading, listening and viewing habits may be complex and individual. Following a contentious presidential election in 2020 and within the context of a global pandemic, some may have found more time to pay attention to the news. In one study, news consumers suggested that they critically consume news content by understanding biases:

Despite higher engagement, interviewees also expressed deep skepticism about the news. Many said it was impossible to fully trust any particular news source, because they felt that all journalists were biased, and the news they produced was reported – either deliberately or unintentionally – in ways that would best serve their political agendas. “It’s all slanted, in my opinion,” one interviewee said.

(Nelson & Lewis, 2021a, para. 5)

One National Public Radio (NPR) listener told researchers that the broadcasts were “anti-Trump” ..., “but I don’t want the news delivered to me necessarily in that snarky way,” (Nelson & Lewis, 2021a, para. 6). The study found that some news consumers prefer Google information to fact-check the news, have fairly rigid views about news bias and generally distrust the news. The public does not always appear to exercise critical thinking skills when doing **keyword** searches.

The research leveraged the COVID-19 pandemic to collect data about how trust in news media may relate to engagement (Nelson & Lewis, 2021b). Sixty qualitative interviews on Zoom video identified self-perception as an important dimension, as well as their trust for specific news organizations. News consumers appeared to accept a level of bias within

media storytelling, but they trusted their abilities to find truths. Nelson & Lewis (2021b) suggested that partisan selective exposure within news consuming must be understood as an interaction between content and audience members.

Another study found an appetite for extremism within social media site content. An analysis of nearly three million Twitter and Facebook posts found that, "Facebook posts and tweets about one's political out-group (that is, the party opposed to one's own) were shared about twice as often as those about one's own political group" (Rathje, Van Bavel, & van der Linden, 2021a, para. 4). Viral social media communication appears to be driven by negativity about the other side of political issues, candidates, parties and people. Rathje, Van Bavel, and van der Linden (2021b) found that an out-group effect was significantly stronger than other predictors of shared social media communication. One explanation may be that the existence of polarized political crowds creates an opportunity for utilizing partisan views as a tool to capture attention. The extensive research revealed that the effect of out-group language results in nearly five times as much sharing as in-group words. The effect was even larger when combined with moral-emotional language. For example, the Facebook angry reaction appeared to help explain popularity of posts. One can argue that Facebook has an economic motivation to allow the spread of misinformation that would make users angry, lead them to share content, drive the newsfeed algorithms and keep people on the site longer. The implication of this is that social media sites contribute to a decline of healthy political communication needed to maintain democracy.

NEWS DESERTS

All the media literacy skills in the world would not address economic conditions that have limited access to local news across the United States. So-called "news deserts" are being tracked in a research project at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill. The mapping of large sections of the country lacking newspaper and other local news media coverage attracted public attention. Abernathy (2021) defines a news desert as, "a community, either rural or urban, with limited access to

the sort of credible and comprehensive news and information that feeds democracy at the grassroots level” (Abernathy, 2021, para. 4). Abernathy notes that at least 200 U.S. counties do not have a local newspaper, half of all counties have one, and most of these are published weekly. Abernathy (2020) developed a chart that allows people within a community to rate their news. Abernathy told *Columbia Journalism Review* that the lack of “a robust ecosystem” created complex inequities: “We have this poverty compared to what we had even a decade ago, regardless of whether you measure the loss of news organizations, or whether you measure the loss of reporters, or the loss of news stories” (Harris, 2021, para. 6). Abernathy says the “news poverty” crisis extends beyond local newspapers to reduced broadcast newsroom staffs (Abernathy, 2021, para. 9). Increasingly, access to news depends upon Facebook algorithms and newsfeed access to information. Typically, social media content may be viewed as superficial and lacking traditional journalistic quality:

Facebook can be additive, but it’s not gonna be a substitute. Community groups can be additive, but they’re not gonna be a substitute. What are all the aggregates, and what do they add up to? It’s not to say we’re going back to what we had, but there is a need to have some kind of general consensus for people as to what’s at stake.

(Abernathy, 2021, para. 22)

A once dominant local news model “collapsed” during the first decade of social media communication: “What we need to figure out is what is the best business model for a community, whether that’s for profit, nonprofit, some combination of that,” (Abernathy, 2021, para. 25). News media historically prospered by holding control of advertising, but the Internet and social media disrupted this by offering wide access to online audiences.

Box 9.2: Thought Leader: Gemma Puglisi

Before there was social media, there was plain “social” in Washington, DC – from restaurants to “tapes” to social media: How readers communicated and connected.

Our nation’s capital, Washington, D.C. has always been a social town. Growing up in the suburbs, not too far from this great city and visiting over the weekends where my dad worked as a barber a few blocks from the White House, I recall all the great restaurants and the buzz inside and out.



FIGURE 9.1 *Gemma Puglisi, American University. Photograph by Jon Akin, Clay and Company*

Reading the papers and the gossip sections, was really something I enjoyed as a young teen and I always wanted to know who was dining where, what event was happening, who was invited, who was not, and sometimes what the politicians and other prominent individuals who influenced (Merriam Webster.com, 2021) this town were doing in their positions and outside of those “day” jobs. (There have always been individuals making their mark or “affect(ing) someone or something in an important way” (Merriam Webster.com, 2021). The word “influence” has always been there.) But it changed dramatically when social media arrived (Geyser, 2012, para. 3).

Washington, DC has always been known for its restaurant scene. We must begin with the famous Sans Souci (Brunner, 2019, para. 3) – known as the “Sans” – and very near to the White House, and one of the top places to be seen during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The venue is where you would see rock stars like Beatle John Lennon and wife, Yoko Ono; President Gerald Ford and first Lady Betty Ford; and *Washington Post* columnist Art Buchwald. Rob Brunner’s *Washingtonian Magazine* article reported that rock legend Mick Jagger and his wife in the early 1970s, Bianca Jagger, had been in Washington to attend a hearing and went to the French restaurant, did not have a reservation and were not recognized:

Madeleine Sosnitsky, the hostess at the time, had a feeling the would-be patrons were famous but couldn’t quite place them. So, she went to talk it over with

the maître d. "He said, 'They're not dressed properly. Just tell them to go,'" Sosnitsky recalls. "So, I did."

(Brunner, 2019, para. 2)

There were some other great restaurants, too. "Establishments such as Rive Gauche, Duke Zeibert's and Paul Young's Restaurant had plenty of devotees..." but they were not as popular or powerful as the "Sans" when it came to "Washington Glamour" (Brunner, 2019, para. 5).

Yet, Duke Zeibert's place did a great job in securing top tables for those making history or where some clientele were more popular than others (Pointer, 2018, para. 21). The famous restaurateur served everyone in DC from sports legends, stars, and of course, presidents (Pointer, 2018, para. 3). But he also made sure that the newsmakers or heavy hitters were sitting in certain places, while "average joes" were pushed in the back in the area known as "Siberia" (Pointer, 2018, para. 31). When the late writer Nora Ephron was pushed back there with a friend, and noted that the "boy's club crowd" was getting the prime seating she remarked, "Exactly what do you have to do to get a good table in this place...Be indicted?" (Pointer, 2018, para. 34).

Of course, one of the "oldest saloons" in DC is the Old Ebbitt Grill, founded in 1856, which began as a boarding house with the saloon as part of the structure (Maura, 2016, para. 2). The boarding house was where President McKinley stayed when he was in Congress and many presidents including Ulysses S. Grant, Andrew Johnson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Warren Harding had drinks (Maura, 2016, para. 3).

Restaurants, bars, and of course, parties at famous Washingtonians homes were, perhaps, one of the biggest means of socializing. In *Vanity Fair*, correspondent Maureen Orth (2007) looked back at the social scene in our nation's capital, including White House State dinners as well as parties. Here, she asks Sally Quinn, wife of the late Ben Bradlee, former editor of *The Washington Post*, Georgetown hostess, and now a blogger for *The Washington Post*, her thoughts then and now:

The biggest difference is that entertaining now is so much more partisan. When I first came here, you'd go to dinner and all different political persuasions were

represented. You were all working for the same country, but you differed in what you thought was best for the country. . . . The people who did the entertaining were women who today would have a career, and what they did for a living was to bring people together. At parties, a lot of news was made and deals were made. That rarely exists anymore.

(Orth, 2007, para. 8)

The restaurant scene, of course, was hopping during the Watergate years and those surrounding President Nixon, were all “influencing” the city and the country. Of course, there was no social media during those years, but Nixon used something that he later would regret: the infamous tapes. The taping system he wanted in the White House, for whatever reason he was thinking, became activated on February 26, 1971 (Miller Center, 2021). In an analysis piece in the *Washington Post*, dated May of 2017, Richard A. Moss and Luke Nichter offer reasons why Presidents taped conversations (Moss & Nichter, 2017, para. 3). Both authors first point out that other Presidents before and after Nixon used taping conversations for a variety of reasons such as “protecting the President from later conflicts.” H.R. Haldeman, Nixon’s former chief of staff noted that the tapes could have ‘a second benefit...’ like providing the President ‘with valuable reference material for his own use (Moss & Nichter, 2017, para. 4). The article points out that former President Lyndon Johnson’s use of tapes helped him immensely when he was ready to write his memoirs and could refer to the tapes as a reference (Moss & Nichter, 2017, para. 5). And finally, “taped conversations may be more immediately useful in running the White House, which is a large and complex organization (Moss & Nichter, 2017, para. 8).

Even former president, Donald Trump, is referenced in the article during his time in office when he tweeted about former FBI director, James B. Comey (Moss & Nichter, 2017, para. 1):

With that response from the President, *Washington Post* reporter, Philip Bump, noted in his article that Trump most likely did have recordings of his Oval Office conversations (Bump, 2017, para. 3). And since we are on the subject about the former President, he was really the first who used Twitter to communicate pretty much everything that was on his



FIGURE 9.2 *Trump's Comey tweet. Source: @realDonaldTrump Tweet (2017)*

mind. Even award-winning Watergate journalist, Carl Bernstein noted Trump’s use of the platform at a lecture given in Herzliya in May of 2017:

Trump uses Twitter as a means of communication and bypasses traditional media. I do not believe this is a bad thing because I think his tweets represent a “road map” of his mind. They faithfully represent what he feels and thinks far more than any of his written speeches.

(Idc.ac.il/en, 2017, para. 17)

Trump’s use of Twitter was documented by the *TweetBinder Blog* who analyzed his tweets from 2009/2021. In it, they provide an overview and timeline (Twitterbinder, 2021, para. 2):

- 59,553 Tweets and Retweets
- 46,919 Tweets (Original tweets)
- 12,634 Retweets
- 88,936,841 Followers
- 51 Following
- 389,842,552 Retweets received
- 1,659,180,779 Likes received
- March 18th 2009 Opened his Twitter account
- May 4th 2009 Sent his first Tweet
- Twitter for iPhone Favorite tool to tweet (17,260 tweets sent)

- “Tonight, @FLOTUS and I tested positive for COVID-19. We will begin our quarantine and recovery process immediately. We will get through this TOGETHER!” **Most retweeted tweet (416,342 retweets) October 11th 2020**
- “To all of those who have asked, I will not be going to the Inauguration on January 20th.” **Last tweet sent January, 8th 2021**
- “45th President of the United States of America” **Last Twitter Bio**

They begin the blog with an update and state:

On January 8, 2021, Twitter decided to permanently suspend Donald Trump’s Twitter account.

(Twitterbinder, 2021, para. 1)

That suspension occurred literally two days after the Capitol Insurrection of January 6, 2021. The blog also posts that the last tweet by the former President prior to the suspension was:

The 75,000 great American Patriots who voted for me, AMERICA FIRST, and MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN, will have a GIANT VOICE long into the future. They will not be disrespected or treated unfairly in any way, shape, or form!!!

(Twitterbinder, 2021, para. 3)

Per the blog and highlights above, one of the most retweeted tweets was Trump’s announcement that he and the first lady, Melania, both tested “positive for COVID-19 (Twitterbinder, 2021, para. 2).

Overall, Trump’s use of the platform showcased that he was savvy to understand messaging and how he personally wanted to get those messages across to his audiences. Associated Press reporters, Aamer Madhani and Jill Colvin in their reporting, “How Donald Trump used Twitter to Amplify his Message,” gave their assessment:

Mr. Trump, a novice politician but seasoned salesman, realized the power of social media in ways that few other politicians did. And he wielded it with never-before-seen power to diminish his opponents, shape elections, and mold reality—at least in the eyes of his supporters.

(Madhani & Colvin, 2021, para. 5)

There was always controversy as mentioned in the tweets and those messages. “Mr. Trump often tweeted well past midnight and before dawn, a cathartic outlet for grievances” (Madhani & Colvin, 2021, para. 19). The article continues:

In one of his most memorable Twitter stumbles, Mr. Trump in May 2017 sent (and later deleted) a cryptic post-midnight tweet that read “Despite the constant negative press covfefe.”

The tweeter-in-chief had fallen asleep mid-message and that the man who once bragged of having “the best words” was adding a new word to the lexicon to properly describe collusion between Democrats and the press.

(Madhani & Colvin, 2021, para. 22).

Though Trump may have used Twitter as his main source of communication, his predecessor, former President Barack Obama, used social media effectively not only during his administration but to secure his position as President of the United States in 2009.

His Chicago-based campaign team used social media and technology as an integral part of their campaign strategy, not only to raise money, but also more importantly, to develop a groundswell of empowered volunteers who felt that they could make a difference.

(Aaker & Chang, 2009, para. 1)

President Obama will always be known as the first President to use social media and has often been referred to as “the first social-media President.” But according to an article in the *Atlantic* back in 2017, any person who had won the presidency then, would have probably been given the same title (Bogost, 2017, para. 16).

There are great analogies made in the article and here’s one that needs to be pointed out. President John F. Kennedy is often credited for being the “the first television president” (Bogost, 2017, para. 2). But as Bogost points out, he “wasn’t the first one to appear on television.” There were others such as Franklin D. Roosevelt and Truman (Bogost, 2017, para. 2). While Kennedy had television, Roosevelt had his fireside chats or radio addresses to connect with Americans which were so influential

and united the country (LaFrance, 2017, para. 15). But Kennedy is given that “television” title because of the famous debate back in 1960 with Richard Nixon, where the charismatic president seemed so at ease while Nixon was visibly sweating and uncomfortable under the lights.

And while Kennedy mastered the television medium, Obama did the same for social media. But it’s what his administration did right before it was over, to demonstrate how much they understood the platforms and how to preserve it. They reached out to the public to ask how to preserve all the social media, even having a contest.

The White House demonstrated remarkable astuteness toward this end, both culturally and rhetorically. It explicitly invited “students, data engineers, artists, and researchers” to contribute – just the communities likely to feel adept and engaged with the technological sphere. It reaffirmed that the Obama administration was up on the latest trends, suggesting Twitter bots, query tools, and metadata services as examples of possible submissions. It used keywords commensurate with the values and rhetoric of the technology community. And most importantly, it issued the call in the form of a short-term contest, of sorts: submissions were to be completed “no later than mid-December [2016],” or about two months after the call was first issued.

(Bogost, 2017, para. 7)

That was Obama. In 2020, there was Joe Biden and his campaign for the presidency. Commentators noticed something else that stood out. In Peter Suciú’s article in *Forbes*, technology guru and analyst, John Crandall of Netpop Research, makes a smart deduction:

“I’m not sure how it happened, but my telephone number and email address seem to be known by almost every senior party official, and I’ve received texts and emails from all of them,” said Crandall. The crossover has been extraordinary, powerful and attention grabbing. The themes they share have spread the word, reinforced their positions, and built momentum for additional fundraising.

(Suciú, 2020, para. 4)

Obama may have started the social media craze, but it is here to stay and every president will continue to have their imprint. The days of

“socializing” in Washington have certainly changed from what I remember as a young teen. There may be places that people still go, *but the buzz it once had seems to be mostly on the Internet*. Politicians will still travel from town to town, meeting Americans and spending time with them – but there is no question that they will keep using other means to carry their voices on different platforms, and it is called social media. Iconic Washington restaurants that were hard to get reservations or the places to “be seen” are now mostly gone. Where the “Sans Souci” once stood, is now a McDonald’s (Brunner, 2019, para. 19).

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REVISITING POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Positive and negative political campaign tactics that present candidate **identity**, engage and activate interest through interaction, cultivate online community support for social movements and seek power often set tone for the lowest common denominator of communication. Social media communication users need to articulate and use their values that motivate a desire for share of voice (SoV) within political conversation. The use of political memes, for example, reflect a willingness to exploit intellectual property (IP) in the service of political popularity. The public should demand greater political campaign transparency when it comes to who is backing a particular social movement and why. Historically, we looked to journalists as trusted watchdogs seeking truths, but the digital and social era disrupted economics, **social business** models and industry motivation. Public relations (PR) since the 20th Century sought to manage news and information on the **social graph**, and social media channels were quickly adopted as new tools of campaign and social movement promotion. The rise of opinion over fact, thought leadership over governance, and greed over public interest left many wondering about the future. Across the U.S., non-profit journalism models, funded by private foundations, were launched to provide the public with more accurate news content.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What individual responsibilities do each of us have when it comes to judging how to respond to social media posts?
2. Do you believe that social media polarization is good or bad? Why are people concerned about filter bubbles and echo chambers?
3. How would you use the powers of government to transform social media communication into a healthier democratic debate of public issues and policies?

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Technologies of Freedom and Oppression

“Instead of users choosing to receive content from these actors, it is our platform that is choosing to give [these troll farms] an enormous reach.”

Jeff Allen, former Facebook senior-level data scientist (2019)

Troll farms in Eastern Europe dominated Christian and Black Facebook pages ahead of the divisive 2020 U.S. presidential election (Hao, 2021). Facebook’s “engagement-hungry algorithm” and “a whack-a-mole strategy,” failed to stop all but the worst spammers (Hao, 2021, paras 1–2):

Troll farms – professionalized groups that work in a coordinated fashion to post provocative content, often propaganda, to social networks – were still building massive audiences by running networks of Facebook pages. Their content was reaching 140 million US users per month – 75% of whom had never followed any of the pages. They were seeing the content because Facebook’s content-recommendation system had pushed it into their news feeds.

(Hao, 2021, para. 3)

Facebook claims that the industry was aware of the problems, and has since responded to stop troll farms from flooding the news feed with misinformation and disinformation. However, *MIT Technology Review* discovered that at least five troll farms remained active in 2021. Russia’s Internet Research Agency appeared to have targeted similar demographic groups on Facebook during the 2016 elections, and troll farms in Macedonia spread political propaganda for profit (Silverman, Feder, Cvetkovska & Belford, 2018). Investigations followed to determine connections between troll farms and violation of laws by U.S. citizens backing some of the spread of political posts that reached as many as 140 million Americans each month. The impact of polarized political content appears to be magnified by the homogeneity of group political communication within social networks (Himmelboim, McCreery, & Smith, 2013). Social media have become strategic for any organization using a campaign to share content, including “a branded hashtag to help manage their reputation..., as well as embracing user-generated hashtags from their community” (Freberg, 2019, p. 11). Political communities identify and engage around specific user and branded content.

While social media sites opened access to a wider range of free speech, the January 6, 2021 Capitol attack raised new issues about the limit of the marketplace of ideas during a global pandemic, the spread of misinformation, continued social division and rapid technological innovation. At a panel discussion in September of that year, University of Florida Professor Jasmine McNeal drew the distinction between allowing for freedom of speech, but not tolerating “blowing stuff up or committing a violent act” (Lipschultz, 2021, para. 3). Texas Christian University Professor Daxton “Chip” Stewart added that social platform “involvement in the organizing of these rallies” was “by no means intentional” (Lipschultz, 2021, para. 5).



FIGURE 10.1 *University of Nebraska at Omaha Panel. Courtesy UNO Social Media Lab for Research and Engagement (2021).*

Still, a whistleblower disclosed that Facebook loosened controls after the 2020 election, and she alleged that the company covered this up after the attack. *The New York Times* reporter Adam Goldman was at the Capitol, as protesters turned violent. “I watched them attack journalists, literally assault journalists and destroy their equipment” (Lipschultz, 2021, para. 8). Goldman could not reconcile seeing a mob claiming to protect the U.S. Constitution and then turning on journalists they viewed as enemies: “it was a very jarring experience to watch on the ground” (Lipschultz, 2021, para. 10). University of North Carolina Professor Tori Ekstrand found a need to explore “national psychology” of radicalized Donald Trump supporters (Lipschultz, 2021, para. 11). “[F]reedom of speech can be abused,” University of Oregon Professor Kyu Ho Youm concluded. There are “people who know how to play games” to use the First Amendment “as an extraordinary weapon” (Lipschultz, 2021, para. 13).

Beyond the attack on the Capitol, a Facebook whistleblower turned over thousands of internal company documents that show their social media sites more generally may cause mental health and other issues. *The Wall Street Journal* published a Facebook Files series: “Facebook, Inc. knows, in acute detail, that its platforms are riddled with flaws that cause harm, often in ways only the company fully understands” (Horwitz, 2021, para. 1). Instagram, for example, is a site that promotes use for social media **influence**, and teens sometimes become absorbed in extreme efforts focused on beauty, glamour, unsafe video creation and a desire to claim celebrity status.

CELEBRITIES, TECHNOLOGIES AND INFLUENCE ISSUES

The U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has attempted to regulate celebrity and brand use of paid influence, but regulatory enforcement powers are limited (Federal Trade Commission. 2016; *FTC v. Lord and Taylor*, 2016). Under commercial speech law, the FTC may regulate deceptive advertising by social media influencers, but political speech has core First Amendment protection. The FTC also has attempted to protect social media user data privacy (*FTC v. Facebook*, 2020), but Facebook and other large companies may not always follow the terms of a consent agreement, and fines are small relative to huge corporate profits. Regulation of advertising continues to present a variety of legal issues within the global context of Internet and digital communication (Fueroghne, 2017). Celebrity influence happens within the purpose of free expression and political decision-making: “If, in a democracy, the government acts on behalf of and with the consent of the governed, then the people must have the freedom to share information and ideas...” (Olson, 2021, p. 29). Government action in the U.S. may not be overbroad or vague

because “First Amendment due process” requires protection of individual rights (Olson, 2021, p. 33).

The European Union focus on human rights antitrust **monopoly** regulation has also tended to end with relatively small fines imposed on social media, eCommerce and other global economic corporations. Throughout the world, though, national governments added requirements for the largest social media sites to continue to operate within their countries. Aspects of data privacy go beyond law to ethics (Santa Clara Principles, 2018). Condemnation of social media companies, for example, has followed public knowledge that hate speech and neo-Nazis have been able to evade attempts to ban them (Mixon, 2020; Townsend, 2020). Much remains unsettled in the broad area of political communication shared on social media platforms. The political focus on campaigns and elections may serve to expand freedom of expression on social media platforms outside of campaign cycles.

POLITICAL CAMPAIGN ISSUES

Recent analyses of political communication tend to emphasize race and gender as salient issues for the foreseeable future. The nomination of Vice President Kamala Harris, for example, was met by Republican opinion leaders at Fox News “with misogyny – and racist tropes – that continued” (Hall, 2022, p. 280). Similarly, Donald Trump’s responses to Harris and diverse new members of Congress were sexists and racist in tone:

Harris’ combination of identities is called *intersectionality*, and women of color in politics face both racist and sexist stereotypes and attacks – for example, early portrayals of Michelle Obama as “an angry Black woman,” or Trump’s telling four freshman representatives of color – Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Tlaib and Ayanna Pressley – to “go back where they came from.

(Hall, 2022, p. 281)

The larger social context included **key opinion leaders (KOLs)** – #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter activism that included a nearly continuous stream of tweets over months and years calling out social and political injustice. Gender and sexual orientation for non-heterosexual or cisgender people also may be politically polarizing with an evolving landscape of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, and Two-Spirit (LGBTQ2S+) Republican and Democrat rhetoric.

Ocasio-Cortez (@AOC) had nearly 13 million Twitter followers and a bio emphasizing the fight against poverty and resistance to big money lobbying. In

2021, she sparked viral memes after attending the Met Gala in a custom dress with “Tax the Rich” in red letters on her back:

Designers and corporate sponsors generally pay the hefty price of admission — \$35,000 a ticket, or \$200,000 to \$300,000 a table — for the gala’s guests, who typically include a quorum of Kardashians, Hollywood A-listers and supermodels. The star-studded event is often referred to as the Oscars of fashion.

(Karni, 2021, para. 3)

While elected officials typically are offered free tickets, Donald Trump, Jr., the former president’s son, tweeted that AOC was sending a fraudulent message “while she’s hanging out with a bunch of wealthy leftwing elites” (Karni, 2021, para. 4). A Microsoft PowerBI NodeXL Twitter **social media dashboard** showed the polarized reaction to the event.

The “Tax the Rich” dress, as well as meme images of it, dominated the Met Gala conversation on Twitter. One of the political communication challenges is that social media discussion of an issue, such as tax rates for the wealthy, tends to devolve into partisan attacks that quickly produce polarized clusters failing to engage opponents in meaningful dialogue.



FIGURE 10.2 #TaxTheRich. NodeXL PowerBI Image Dashboard. Source: NodeXL Data Twitter Images for #TaxTheRich

SOCIAL MOVEMENT AND ACTIVISM

Breonna Taylor, 26, was a Black emergency medical technician in Louisville shot by police raiding her apartment in 2020. Black women journalists have been among those critical of media coverage that failed “to humanize her, a lack of context around police brutality, and the time it took after her death for her story to be told” (Allsop, 2021a, para. 1). Journalists tend to cling to the objective news model that led them to follow a lack of criminal charges against the police officer who shot Taylor, as well as a lawsuit brought by Taylor’s boyfriend (Allsop, 2021b). The larger context of police brutality sparked #BlackLivesMatter protests across the country, and these tended to spread on social media and be covered by news media. The Minneapolis trial and conviction of Derek Chauvin, a white police officer who killed George Floyd, and a monetary settlement with his family drove the narrative that police must stop the use of excessive force against minorities. The power of activism, protests and social movements balanced a traditional tendency of news reporters to listen to the local police narrative, repeat official reports, and marginalize criticism of racism and abuse.

Box 10.1: Objectivity and Activism

Emily Wilder, 22, was a new Associated Press (AP) reporter in Phoenix when a new conflict between Israel and Palestine sparked within the news. On Twitter, Wilder (@vv1lder) retweeted and commented.



emily wilder

@vv1lder

...

“objectivity” feels fickle when the basic terms we use to report news implicitly stake a claim. using “israel” but never “palestine,” or “war” but not “siege and occupation” are political choices—yet media make those exact choices all the time without being flagged as biased

6:34 PM · May 16, 2021 · Twitter Web App

5,368 Retweets

363 Quote Tweets

17.2K Likes

FIGURE 10.3 *Emily Wilder tweeted reaction to being fired by AP. emily wilder, @vv1lder*

"objectivity" feels fickle when the basic terms we use to report news implicitly stake a claim. using "Israel" but never "palestine," or "war" but not "siege and occupation" are political choices – yet media make those exact choices all the time without being flagged as biased.

6:34 PM – May 16, 2021, **5,368** Retweets **363** Quote Tweets **17.2K** Likes

Wilder schooled at Stanford University, and the college Republicans attacked her as an "anti-Israel agitator" (Allsop, 2021a, para. 1). Wilder is Jewish, but they also claimed she had made anti-Semitic comments on campus. Conservative media claimed the AP was biased against Israel after the nation leveled Associated Press news offices in Gaza City under the claim that Hamas was nearby. "This had really nothing to do with Wilder – but..., the AP had fired her anyway, citing violations of its social-media policy" (Allsop, 2021a, para. 2). For nearly a decade, the Associated Press has required its news reporters to avoid social media comments that could impacts its reporters' ability to fairly cover conflicts.

Wilder responded on Twitter to her firing that she has been made a "scapegoat" after the news organization was attacked by powerful conservatives (Wilder, 2021b, para. 3):

It's terrifying as a young woman who was hung out to dry when I needed support from my institution most. And it's enraging as a Jewish person – who grew up in a Jewish community, attended Orthodox schooling and devoted my college years to studying Palestine and Israel – that I could be defamed as antisemitic and thrown under the bus in the process.

(Wilder, 2021b, para. 4)

Wilder claimed that social media rules stifle journalists. "...I have to ask what kind of message this sends to young people who are hoping to channel righteous indignation or passion for justice into impactful storytelling" (Wilder, 2021b, para. 5). She claimed that the AP "would sacrifice those with the least power to the cruel trolling of a group of anonymous bullies" (Wilder, 2021b, para. 5). While much of social media content is filled with commentary, news organization policies tend to restrict working journalists from offering their opinions under the view that news reporters cannot be political activists.

Citizen journalists and bloggers may fill an opinion vacuum when news organizations avoid commentary. Cable news channel histrionics also tend to fill the space. This leaves significant source and message credibility concerns within the public sphere. At the same time, modern public relations, advertising and social marketing influence-peddling creates a social media communication space filled with a cacophony of cascading noise. Protest news, for example, must be judged by Facebook readers as legitimate or marginalized, and this is similar to traditional news media gatekeeping based upon the type of protest and location (Harlow & Kilgow, 2021; Gil-Lopez, 2021). Consumers of political news and information are left to sort fact from fiction, as well as humans from computer-generated conversation. From deepfakes video to chatbots, technologies continue to embed within our political conversation across social media platforms. It remains unclear at this writing whether or not crypto currency blockchain non-fungible token (NFT) Web 3 spaces will serve to improve political communication verification or create thorny new problems from bad actors. For more than a decade, we have known that global use of interactive content may lead to “news manipulation,” sponsorship favoring, “changes in the information power structure,” and ethical **trust** and privacy issues (Larson, 2008, pp. 290–306). New digital tools may be used for good or evil, and the introduction of artificial intelligence raises the stakes for political truth and democracies within social media communication.

AI ISSUES

Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning technologies present potential dangers when it comes to a loss of data privacy. In a digital world, most of the information about us resides in social network cloud storage that is controlled by the huge corporate players – Google Alphabet, Amazon AWS, Apple, Microsoft, Facebook and Instagram Meta and others. Data can be scraped for good reasons of benefit to consumers, but the storage of personal information can also be of interest to government and law enforcement agencies. This can turn corporations into unwitting state actors.

Box 10.2: Apple Cloud Data Privacy Concerns

Technology companies, such as Apple, have long promised to protect user mobile phone and other device data through sophisticated encryption

methods. However, increasingly they also must police their sites for illegal behavior, such as the storage of photographs and videos that contain child **pornography** defined as obscene and illegal, or other abuse. Even NFTs, or pieces of the digital files, may point from Web 3 spaces to older Web 2 cloud storage servers. Police agencies investigating potential crimes, seek access to the data as evidence for active cases. Apple took a leading step in trying to strike a balance between data security and safety:

A new opt-in setting in family iCloud accounts will use machine learning to detect nudity in images sent in iMessage. The system can also block those images from being sent or received, display warnings, and in some cases alert parents that a child viewed or sent them. Siri and search will now display a warning if it detects that someone is searching for or seeing child sexual abuse materials, also known as CSAM, and offer options to seek help for their behavior or to report what they found.

(Greenberg, 2021, para. 2)

The Apple system searches cloud device storage for “known child sexual abuse images,” reports to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, (NCMEC), and offers “endorsements from several other well-known cryptography experts” (Greenberg, 2021, paras 3–4). While upload file scanning is nothing new for Microsoft’s Dropbox storage, Apple’s “image analysis” detection may be considered “a step toward a troubling new form of surveillance and weakened its historically strong privacy stance” (Greenberg, 2021, para. 7). The technical levels of encryption have become more complex and hidden on phones, laptops, desktops and tablets storing files in the cloud. The challenge is to increase security while also appeasing law enforcement seeking access to criminal behavior:

The tool designed to detected known images of child sexual abuse, called “neuralMatch,” will scan images before they are uploaded to iCloud. If it finds a match, the image will be reviewed by a human. If child pornography is confirmed, the user’s account will be disabled...

(Bajak & Ortutay, 2021, para. 2)

The scanning of encrypted Apple iMessages also suggested a new level of surveillance for a company that claimed to protect consumer privacy.

So-called “digital fingerprints” have existed within Facebook and other **social network site (SNS)** scanning systems, but the Apple move taps into owned hardware in a “delicate balancing act between cracking down on the exploitation of children while keeping its high-profile commitment to protecting the privacy of its users” (Bajak & Ortutay, 2021, paras 7–8). In the U.S., the Supreme Court has raised issues about law enforcement searches of private information for the existence of criminal evidence when police fail to obtain a proper search warrant from a court. The Fourth Amendment of the Constitution protects individual rights from improper search and seizure of personal information, but obscenity is not protected by the First Amendment.

BLOCKCHAIN WEB3 TRUST AND VERIFICATION ISSUES

Blockchain *distributive* technologies may be coming quickly to electronic commerce, although the hype of it should be balanced against current issues, such as energy consumption, lack of user interfaces, and public skepticism. During the February 2022 Super Bowl, Hollywood celebrities endorsed cryptocurrencies in expensive television advertising — presumably designed to raise public awareness and increase credibility of the technological innovation. Additionally, off-site trading of digital object items, such as multi-player game skins, has the potential to create in-game new revenue streams. Verification is important in the development of social media advertising models. Likewise, news and information verification chains of users could help slow the spread of misinformation, malinformation and disinformation. Innovators also worry about lagging government regulation that may deter future growth of mass adoption. Web 3 is the third wave of promises about empowering people and communities by giving them a voice in political and economic decision-making (Boswell, 2022). The success of blockchain depends upon the reliability of programming and scalability of large numbers of users. Still, the potential to utilize artificial intelligence through validators could create value. Decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs) are likely to diffuse within business transactions and perhaps remain in the background for most consumers.

Non-fungible token (NFT) was named the Collins Dictionary “word of the year” in 2021 after the “unique digital certificate, registered in a blockchain, that is used to record ownership of an asset such as an artwork or a collectible” turned

into a source of large money (Associated Press, 2021, para. 1). Artist Beeple (Mike Winkelmann) auctioned at Christie's (@ChristiesInc) a collage collection of works, "Everydays: The First 5000 Days," for a whopping \$69 million (Kastrenakes, 2021):

The record-smashing NFT sale comes after months of increasingly valuable auctions. In October, Winkelmann sold his first series of NFTs, with a pair going for \$66,666.66 each. In December, he sold a series of works for \$3.5 million total. And last month, one of the NFTs that originally sold for \$66,666.66 was resold for \$6.6 million.

(Kastrenakes, 2021, para. 3)

NFTs are exchanged as blockchain digital file licensed content, and this has led to wild market speculation: "Buyers typically get limited rights to display the digital artwork they represent, but in many ways, they're just buying bragging rights and an asset they may be able to resell later" (Kastrenakes, 2021, para. 4). Blockchain transaction of creative works use cryptocurrencies, and these have been challenged by national governments and their vested interest in traditional currencies. The wave of activity has been called Web 3, as a way to frame the new activity as a third wave after the Internet and social media. It remains to be seen if blockchain will revolutionize political communication, but the digital disruption is likely to lead to fresh regulatory activity. Web 3 is "an umbrella term" (Allyn, 2021, para. 2). As has been the case with all previous digital disruption, it is difficult to predict specific innovative digital disruption that will be facilitated by sticky new technologies that capture large swaths of public interest and adoption. As this book is being published, non-fungible tokens (NFTs) were viewed as emerging digital properties and licensing that can be sold to an interested market. Future hype about some other application may be more important.

In a sense, rapid social and technological change require "resilience," or hopeful approaches that help individuals respond and adapt (Anderson & Guo, 2021, p. 23). Individual influencers and organizations may play important roles through PR advocacy "in circulating organizational agendas and shaping the marketplace of ideas" (Anderson & Guo, 2021, p. 23). This is because, "Public relations supplies advocacy, narratives, and other forms of rhetoric through messages, images, campaigns, and events in multiple media channels" (Anderson & Guo, 2021, p. 25). Functioning mechanisms of social change may happen because "discourse can disrupt meta-narratives" (Anderson & Guo, 2021, p. 36). Social media communication frequently represents disruptive discourse between polarized social networks that fundamentally disagree about salient social issues. Advocates may engage in ongoing arguments that never lead to a resolution. Ultimately, powerbrokers must

make decisions – sometimes responding to spikes in social media conversation, but other times either holding to the status quo or previously decided change. Functions and disfunctions within the political system should be judged by the public as either democratic or antidemocratic practices. The ability of individuals to create user-generated content (UGC) raises unique ethical questions about “digital injustice” that impact social groups:

Digital exploitation and digital destructive forces constitute economic forms of digital alienation.... (and) digital production can also have negative and destructive effects on nature and the health of human beings... In the realm of digital politics, alienation takes on the form of digital domination: digital technologies are used as means of dictatorship, surveillance, exclusion, control, war, and violence. In digital culture, alienation is digital ideology and digital disrespect: ideologies such as online nationalism or online racism are spread via digital networks; humans are disrespected in Internet communication...
(Fuchs, 2021, p. 195)

The same technologies that may give rise to constructive social media communities also may unleash destruction. Political skepticism through media literacy is required to engage in productive social conversation that limits the potential for harms and injustice. Influence of others historically was a matter of psychological “suggestion doctrine” (Parsons, 2021, p. 80). As early as 1898, uncritical acceptance foreshadowed post World War II persuasion research:

But while the fundamental, automatic effects process of suggestion theory clearly mirrors... descriptions of a magic bullet, it diverges in one critical aspect... varying conditions of *suggestibility*, or susceptibility to suggestion by age, educational level, gender and ethnicity. The power of suggestion was also seen as contingent on situational context and the perceived credibility of the source, in what was then known as *prestige suggestion*.

(Parsons, 2021, p. 81)

So-called limited effects have been viewed as a function of personal influence and “interpersonal networks” within groups (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, p. 82), as well as outcomes from information campaigns and communicative consent (Salmon, 1989; Glasser & Salmon, 1995). While academic researchers use competing narratives to describe social influence, the social media communication era represents a departure from geographical and media practitioner-based persuasion alone. Instead, diffusion of influence across interest groups and topics appears to be

fragmented – including powerful entertainment rhetoric of the celebrity culture. Nevertheless, the original modes of source and message credibility continue to function for political communication influence.

Conflicts and consensus exist within healthy democratic structures – from the smallest rural communities to the largest urban centers (Olien, Donohue & Tichenor, 1995). The challenging social “control of information” is a part of understanding the social order:

It is not a question of eliminating conflict – however strongly such as wish might be expressed – but of managing it. Containment or even creation of one controversy may serve to ameliorate or constrain another conflict, often a larger and more encompassing one.

(Olien, Donohue & Tichenor, 1995, p. 302)

We live in a time of disorienting and distracting social and technological change that may magnify political conflict: “The tendency to maintain an atmosphere of conflict can be seen when there are sudden, dramatic, and unilateral changes in the power relationships from which the older conflict definitions emerged” (Olien, Donohue & Tichenor, 1995, p. 304). Political persuasion – from traditional media news to user-generated social media content – functions within pluralistic structures and networks. Individual effects may be explained by social-economic knowledge gaps, media literacy skills, and willingness to learn about new information and form fresh opinions. Resistance to new ideas, though, may happen when information comes, “...from other groups and other contexts that are disqualified as inadequate because they fall outside the dominant definition of reality” (Rakow, 1989, p. 167). The challenge of social media communication has been impacted by advertising and marketing that lacks social responsibility within a context of partisan campaign rhetoric. Political activism of social movements may uncritically accept responsibility for “cultural and sociological pollution of persuasion industries” (Pollay, 1989, p. 195). In this view, “Alleged negative impacts may at first be inadvertent and unintended,” yet “new knowledge changes moral and political responsibilities and views” (Pollay, 1989, p. 195). Social media platforms can become tools for information campaigns used by bad actors who distort realities for their own interests. In a free and relatively unregulated society, social media users also must accept a degree of personal responsibility for sharing verified facts and moderating volatile opinions. Scholarly disagreement over the functionality of conflicting and even manipulative information leads to a conclusion that mediated personal influence remains about the “flow of influence,” “opinion leaders” – “marketing leaders,” “fashion leaders,” and others – and the specific “arena” in which

ideas compete for acceptance (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, pp. 327–334). Social media political communication may be described as happening within a specific news, information, entertainment or cultural space designed to reinforce opinion and behaviors, transmit social and cultural change, make new structural connection, exercise situational influence, and gain social capital.

RECONCEPTUALIZING SOCIAL MEDIA AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

From yellow journalism, the earliest photographs and emerging 20th-Century mass media systems, each new media communication and technology presented challenges and opportunities. During the rise of radio and movies, political propaganda and counter-propaganda were used as tools of war. Radio signals were jammed at borders of political powers interested in silencing opposition voices.

FDR and Harry Truman leveraged radio with fireside chats and whistle stop campaigns that worked to win support for them and their policies. By 1952, U.S. television at the political conventions was quickly emerging as an influential force. The 1960 election of JFK offered evidence that audiences perceived Kennedy and Nixon differently on television compared to radio. We entered an age in which how people looked could be a source of political effectiveness or humor. The Internet briefly emphasized text, but the World Wide Web returned political communication to photos and video that dominated perception. “Narrowcasting” and “fragmentation” of the Internet can be seen as a *threat* to democracy because “citizens do not drink from the same well of information” (Graber, 2001, p. 166). This social context helps us understand why social media communication platforms Instagram and TikTok attract so much attention. When text is used, such as was the case with Donald Trump’s tweets, the language had to be outrageous and polarizing to rise above the noise. Celebrities and entertainment are intertwined within social media political communication. McQuail (2000) surmised that media “mutual self-interest” reflected audience desire for celebrity fame:

Fame and celebrity usually depend upon ...wider systems of meaning that have developed over time and which the mass media did not create nor completely control. They also depend on social networks and hierarchies in the society and on interpersonal processes of discourse, rumour and gossip.

(McQuail, 2000, p. 488)

Thought leadership became a social media industry, as opinions were valuable. Newspapers and other journalistic fact-based enterprises have suffered declines in

public interest in an age of entertainment and polarizing opinion. Foundation and other private funding models emerged in search of how to *reconstruct* a marketplace of ideas that was filled with truths and filtered misinformation, malinformation and disinformation. The Internet of Things (IoT) and blockchain technologies hold hope that automation of verified data might somehow solve our current difficulties, but new technologies typically bring fresh social and political concerns. Good and bad actors are motivated to persuade hearts and minds, use advocacy to change mass behaviors, set political agendas and decide elections. Social media communication narrative frequently frames political issues, amplifies narratives, and engages online communities. There is not much new in the idea that “cognitive representations” reflect memorable “information that elicits vivid visual images” (Harper, 1979, pp. 270–271). The “discourse” and “nature of language used” may become a focus in understanding a “social construction of reality” (Severin & Tankard Jr., 2001, p. 15). While individual uses and gratifications result in distinct media communication effects, political organic and paid advertising campaigns have been shown to spark social movements. Political rhetoric and the devices employed by skilled practitioners may move public opinion in a particular direction across all media communication channels. Journalism within this context struggles to catch attention, be gatekeepers for facts over opinions and lead mass audiences to memorable cognitive processes that inoculate people from weak ideas and failed policies. Too often, the most effective social media communication serves the interests of global political existing powers – governments, corporations, healthcare business and others very good at distracting and deflecting attention. Celebrities and entertainment, including all levels of sports, conveniently provide regular and time-consuming distraction from politics.

The emerging technological state is based upon personal data without mechanisms that adequately protect privacy and ownership of it. Rogers (1995) noted that existing structures tend to reinforce inequalities:

When a system's structure is already very unequal, the consequences of an innovation (especially if it is a relatively high-cost innovation) will lead to greater inequality in the form of wider socioeconomic gaps.

(Rogers, 1995, p. 442)

While widening gaps may not be inevitable, social and political systems would need to prioritize resources. Funding broadband Internet for rural communities, for example, connects users to rich media content. It does not resolve other social and political challenges. Drawing from Foucault, some theorists have suggested that, “discipline involves the surveillance and regulation of people’s behavior”

(Grossberg, Wartella, & Whitney, 1998, p. 405). The politic economy of highly concentrated control over social media sites, such as Facebook Meta's ownership of Instagram, Messenger and Whatsapp, reflect a problematic structure that intersects with powerful digital businesses – Amazon, Apple, Google and Microsoft:

It's particularly harmful to democracy when media systems are in the hands of private tyrannies... Here's this huge system, built at public expense... That's worse than the oligopolies that run steel and computers, because here we're talking about a new mode of information and communication being handed over to private power.

(Chomsky, 1998, p. 188)

It would appear that social media communication failed to ultimately create a truly competitive business environment, and political powers are somewhat beholden to industry. As a global pandemic stretched beyond two years, digital life came to further dominate our identities as individuals, our interaction with others, and our sense of place and community. Chatbots provided customer service and replaced human communication within “the flow of influence” (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955, p. 327). It was difficult to imagine the re-emergence of human communication that could compete with digital interaction. Where news people once helped shape the civic agenda (McCombs & Reynolds, 2009), the task appears to now fall to fragmented social and humorous TikTok videos. In this sense, social media and political communication is likely to continue to be moderated by new technologies that further distance us from each other. Researchers must refresh political concepts, and incorporate effects from new technologies that alter political processes and results.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the best hopes for reforming use of social media for political communication? Which constraints on social and technological change are most disturbing?
2. How might technology be used to assist social media users in identifying and consuming trustworthy information?
3. How could the Internet of Things (IoT) and blockchain create unforeseen challenges when it comes to domestic and foreign efforts to disrupt free flow of information?

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Glossary

A

advertising: paid and commercial messages purchased by an advertiser or agency representative to appear within mainstream traditional or hybrid digital media. Sponsored content or “native advertising” mimics the look and feel of editorial or news content, but it is sponsored as a single ad or part of a larger ad campaign buy.

agenda-setting: a research term for the process of determining political, media and public agendas that guide policymaking and other decisions.

algorithm: processes, instruction sets, or rules within computer programming that are utilized within social media communication to promote or demote news-feed content.

app: short for *application*, an app is software for use on a desktop, laptop, tablet or smartphone that allows the user to apply the power of system software for a particular purpose.

Appellant: the party appealing a case.

artificial intelligence (AI): technologies, including with the Internet of Things (IoT), that seek to promote efficiency through human-machine interfaces.

augmented reality (AR): use of geographic data and mobile smartphone data and images to augment physical spaces with vast amounts of computer data.

B

Barcelona Principles 3.0: public relations research measurement principles developed by the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC) that emphasize evaluation and outcomes.

big data: very large and complex storage of data requiring special processing and management tools.

biometric data: human data, including physiological measures, facial recognition and finger prints that have begun to be regulated by some states.

blockchain: connection of big data computing, part of the “Internet of Things” (IoT).

blog: online sites, often owned media, in which somewhat formal and regular posts (information and commentary) are published. Early blogs were characterized by authenticity, which is the idea that the author presents a more “real” and unfiltered identity.

branding: the marketing technique of emphasizing a brand for a product, service, organization or individual. A logo, face or even a song may reinforce the brand for consumers.

breaking news: real-time events and news that happen as developing news stories. Traditional media emphasize breaking news and this content is frequently spread on social networks.

buzz: the aggregate social network activity from a word, term, phrase or other content. On Twitter, for example, we can track #BreakingNews buzz on a graph of time (X) and total number of tweets (Y).

C

cancel culture: withdrawal of support for celebrities and other public figures or brands that include boycotts and social media shaming campaigns.

chatbot: artificial intelligence that generates an automatic response to a social media user each time she or he responds.

citizen activism: civic participation through support for political candidates, promotion of issues or helping to spark social movements,

citizen journalism: individuals use online platforms to distribute news created as nonprofessional citizen journalists. This content may be “hyperlocal” with a

neighborhood focus that does not attract large enough audiences to interest mainstream media.

clickbait: social media content designed to drive traffic to links for website stories that may lack substance.

click-through rates (CTR): a measure of user clicks on sponsored results.

client: an individual, organization, lawyer or financial claimholder represented by an attorney or law firm.

code of ethics: a set of ethical rules or guidance, such as the PRSA Code of Ethics, that define individual professional behavior within an industry or organization.

commercial speech: advertising, social media influence for a business or promotion of products or services.

common carrier: rules applied to telephone and other universal services requiring nondiscrimination of access and no editorial restriction over content.

community: a core CMC concept that describes how individuals create groups, including interest groups, by sharing information within social networks. In ethics, *communitarianism* places the community and its needs above any individual.

computer-mediated communication (CMC): a social and research construct that begins to explain the nature of social network and social media behavior and culture.

confidentiality agreements: contracts frequently require client information to be kept confidential for a variety of reasons, such as business interests. There may be legal or ethical responsibilities to keep information confidential.

confirmation bias: reinforcement of existing perception when consuming news content.

conflict of interest: individuals or organizations that either act in their own privileged interests instead of others or have a publicly *perceived conflict of interest* may not make moral or ethically sound decisions.

conspiracy theories: claims that interpret history through false explanation that tend to vilify individuals or groups by distorting factual information.

convergence: an early description of the merging of previously separate media, such as print (newspapers and magazines), broadcasting (radio and television), advertising, public relations and marketing. So-called “convergence newsrooms” were developed to allow content producers to work across online media platforms.

conversation: within online interaction, conversation monitoring may be used to increase engagement by responding to comments, reactions and posts by others.

conversion: marketers convert social media activity to sales.

copyright: legal ownership protection of the *manner of expression* within a tangible medium. Failure to use copyrighted content without permission is *copyright infringement*.

cost per click (CPC): a social media alternative advertising measure to the traditional cost per thousand mainstream methods for pricing commercial messages. CPC charges advertisers for every audience user click.

credibility: related to trust and believability. In media research, we talk about source and message credibility. The more content has both, the more likely audience members will be to trust it.

critical thinking and reading: learned analyses skills that include *deconstruction* of socially constructed media content, development of critical questions, and application of critical theory and methods in the viewing, for example, of social media communication.

crowdfunding: raising money by making online appeals that leverage social networking and social sharing. Increasingly, crowdfunding is used to support lawsuits.

crowdsourcing: social networks allow individuals to interact in real time. Crowdsourcing is defined as a method for gathering, filtering, generating and distributing information within a social network. On Twitter, for example, crowdsourcing is used during breaking news to separate facts from rumors.

CrowdTangle: Facebook data insight tool that tracks public content and trends.

C-suite: top-level corporate executives making key decisions that may include social media policies.

customer relationship management (CRM): organizes engagement around customer satisfaction, loyalty and retention.

D

data visualization: graphical images that simplify complex and large datasets through generalized trends or patterns.

deception: intent to mislead, manipulate or alter facts or truth within the *public sphere*. Social media misinformation and disinformation, such as *deep fakes*, may intend to deceive people.

diffusion: the spread of new ideas, practices, processes or products. Diffusion research identifies the earliest innovators (2.5 percent), early adopters (13.5 percent), early majority (34 percent), late majority (34 percent) and laggards (16 percent). The percentage of adopters (Y) is graphed using an S-shaped curve over time (X).

direct message (DM): in Twitter, followers may send private messages that are not broadcast on the larger network.

disinformation: misleading false propaganda that focuses on political attacks against rivals.

E

early adopters: in a diffusion cycle, the first to adopt new technologies and/or ideas.

earned exposure: customer reviewer expressions of positive feelings about products or services.

earned media: public relations professionals work to receive positive attention for their clients through content that is not paid advertising. Earned media may be the product of media relations, a campaign, real-time engagement or other activities.

echo chamber: a closed network of reinforced content repeated by supporters.

electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM): an extension of face-to-face communication applied to social media marketing.

engaged journalism: newsroom use of social media engagement tactics, such as chats, events and other opportunities to interact with audience members in a community.

engagement: the term that describes strengthening social network interaction from passive to more active. It goes beyond passive viewing to clicking on a link, liking content, sharing content and responding to content in some way that can be seen by social media users.

entrepreneur: social media sites have been created and developed by the technology sector, which values an innovative culture. Personal computer *hardware*

and software were first developed by young entrepreneurs, such as Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, and the current industry features inventors and their startups.

equity: common law precedent may be rigid, but equity calls for additional flexibility in constructing a fair legal remedy.

ethics: philosophical study or application of moral principles within human decisions and action.

F

Facebook Insights: a dashboard showing social media managers' performance over time of fan page posts.

Facebook Live: a real-time streaming video app within Facebook that allows for viewing, commenting and use of like, love, sad and angry emoji.

facts: in trial courts, juries decide questions of fact and judges decide questions of law; if there is no jury, the judge decides both questions of law and questions of fact.

fake news: a term applied to propaganda, distortion and manipulation or lies shared with an intent to deceive readers.

fans: social media users may follow fan public pages, and focus on celebrity or other accounts.

filter bubble: reinforcing content that promotes a confirmation bias instead of critically challenging previous ideas.

G

gatekeepers: those who perform a traditional news editorial function of story selection.

golden mean: Confucius claimed *virtue* was found at the middle of two extremes.

H

hashflag: a paid emoji that automatically appears when a promoted hashtag is used.

hashjacking: hijacking a hashtag already in use on Twitter for an event.

hashtag (#): the number sign is used on Twitter and, more recently, Facebook as a filtering device. By searching for and using hashtags, subsets of the larger feed can be seen and used.

human–computer interaction (HCI): early research into how humans engaged with computer hardware and software.

I

idealism: an emphasis on the value of ideas and ideals over material objects, such as products and services in the marketplace.

identity: what we present online through the use of words, photographs, sounds, videos, emoticons, avatar or other means. Each time we decide to communicate (and even when we do not), we suggest an identity to social network site users.

impression: awareness of information, such as from seeing it during a search. Impression management attempts to influence perception by selecting information.

influence: users with a lot of fans, followers or connections tend to be considered influencers. Celebrities' large reach affords them monetized influence, but micro-influencers with 1,000 to 100,000 followers also may be influential due to higher engagement with fans.

infodemic: a stream of misleading and deceptive health information or conspiracy theories during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

innovation: a business culture favoring change over stability.

interaction: each engagement with another SNS account reflects a decision to interact. Interaction and engagement are a key foundation for social media use.

Internet of Things (IoT): networked objects that use online software technologies to collect, process and share data with other devices.

irrationality: philosophical *inclination* to favor emotions instead of reasoned logic.

J

justice: the ideal of reason may be sought through equality, freedom, common good, consistency and natural rights of fair play and balance.

K

key performance indicators (KPI): continuous monitoring of important business variables.

keywords: words used within SEO to move page placement higher in a search by relating to common user language.

key opinion leaders (KOL): expert influencers within a particular field.

L

live tweeting: during an event or breaking news, eyewitnesses and commentators may tweet in real time with updates on any new information.

location-based services (LBS): designed to allow users to check in at locations.

loyalty: an obligation to consistently follow decisions and action of an individual, organization or society.

M

machine learning (ML): AI computer algorithms that use data for continuous optimal performance.

malinformation: deliberately altered content context for personal rather than public interest.

marketing: promoting and selling products and services targeted at a specific market. Research is usually utilized to focus marketing, which may involve use of advertising and social media marketing.

measurement error: all measurement has error and researchers estimate amounts.

media communication: a theoretical perspective that moves away from mass communication and mass audiences toward fragmentation.

media literacy: a way to describe the need for media audience members to possess skills that allow them to deconstruct and understand media content. For example, an information literacy approach would emphasize knowledge and learning. Media literacy scholars suggest that children need to be taught to realize

when they are being sold products and services through sophisticated advertising and marketing campaigns.

memes: social media content that features cultural imitation. Production typically uses easily identifiable characters, iterations and humor. For example, there is a persistent use of an image from the 1971 *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* movie because of an early meme generator site.

metaverse: technological innovation based upon combination of augmented reality, virtual reality and video.

metrics: measurement of behavior within social media. A variety of social media “dashboards,” such as Google Analytics, Sprout, Chartbeat, Hootsuite, Cision, Tweetdeck, Argyle Social, Sprout Social and Radian6 are in use.

mobile communication: smartphones and tablets connected through WiFi or cellphone data. Mobile Internet connections allow for the use of a wide variety of social media apps.

monopoly: commercial business control over supply, processes, products and prices that unfairly disadvantage competitors in the marketplace.

moral reasoning: determination of rights and wrongs based on an ethically-based analysis.

N

narratives: use of storytelling techniques, such as a story arc.

natural language processing (NLP): AI big data processing that uses linguistics to interpret human communication context, such as through chatbots that filter and direct customer questions or complaints.

natural law: historically was seen to imperfectly follow the eternal rules of God. Ancient Greeks, Romans and other sought normative rules describing highest authority about what ought to be done. Classical naturalism sought “the word” and modern naturalism identified ideals. We may derive fundamental ideas of good over evil, a desire for truth and avoidance of harm.

network visualization: social networks generate large amounts of data that may be viewed as a series of network maps of communication hubs and spokes. Visualization depicts through graphs the social space between SNS accounts.

nongovernmental organization (NGO): entities operating in the nonprofit sector rather than government or commercial for-profit businesses.

O

objectivity: a norm within journalism placing value and emphasis on balance, fairness and telling at least two sides to every story. In the second half of the 20th century, journalists strove for objectivity. Recent scholars see it as an unachievable ideal. Social media users of social networks frequently emphasize subjectivity and opinion.

obscenity: lacking First Amendment protection under *Near v. Minnesota*, pornographic depiction of sexual conduct in the U.S.A. is determined by applying the three-part *Miller v. California* test.

organic: a way to describe naturally evolving social media content. Facebook contrasts content that organically circulates on the social network with paid content that is then boosted to the top of feeds or given more prominent placement.

owned media: typically company-owned media, such as a website.

P

paid search: search engines charge advertisers for top placement within search results.

para-social relationship (PSR): one-sided, mediated relational communication with a celebrity without knowledge of it.

paywalls: a system requiring registration and payment by users that limits free access to news and information.

platforms: online sites that offer various social media services.

pornography: sexually explicit content that may be protected under the First Amendment, if falling outside the *Miller obscenity* test.

posts: the act of uploading media content to a social media site. Beyond organic content, the text, photographs or video distributed through a posting may receive wider distribution by paying for a promoted post or sponsored content on a site.

prebunking: a neutralization of misinformation or disinformation before it spreads.

precedent: under common law, previous cases guide decision-making unless other legal authority can be found to change direction.

prior restraint: under common law and the First Amendment, government *censorship* of expression is unconstitutional. After publication, content may be subject to *subsequent punishment*.

privacy: a concept first suggested in the late 19th century that calls for legal protection of intimate details of life, especially when a person seeks to protect these from public view. Private behavior that lacks harm to others may be protected from the public interest.

promoted posts: social media sites charge advertisers to appear in prominent positions that are likely to be seen.

propaganda: information designed to promote or advance a view, cause, person, product or idea. Before World War II, propaganda was simply considered persuasion. However, World War II propaganda caused people to associate the term with a pejorative meaning such that now it suggests the spread of false information.

public figures: general-purpose celebrities or limited-purpose individuals for specific public issues fall under the *actual malice* standard in libel cases.

public official: a decision-making elected or appointed federal or state government employee that falls under the *actual malice* standard in libel cases.

public relations (PR): seeks through professional best practices to present, maintain and manage public images and reputations. Ongoing campaigns use media relations tactics to present perceived positives. Reputation management efforts may be in response to a crisis from perceived negative information.

Q

QAnon: A pro-Trump conspiracy theory movement of U.S. right-wing conservatives that supported the former president by sharing disinformation.

qualified privilege: accurate and fair reporting of public information.

R

radicalization: political extremism that may be cultivated by the sharing of social media misinformation or disinformation.

reach: a traditional mass media measure of distribution, social media are also interested in measuring the broad distribution of content.

real-time social engagement: current PR best practices include nearly immediate response to conversation monitoring of social media. Within a relatively short time, sometimes a matter of minutes, a brand engages on a social network about a trending topic, issue or person.

Reddit: a social media site in which Redditors are active regular users in driving conversation through up and down voting.

return on investment (ROI): calculation of a financial gain minus the cost of an investment. ROI is expressed as a percentage or ratio and is sometimes considered a measure of efficiency.

retweets: redistributing a previous tweet with the letters RT in front of it, this allows Twitter users to easily share content to their social network. Twitter users also post MT for modified tweets and PRT, if an item is a partial retweet.

right to be forgotten (RTBF): European law empowering users to have personal information removed from the Internet and disconnected from search engines, such as Google.

roles: individuals adopt roles, much as an actor might. A social media professional, for example, may perceive and express the role of an innovator or entrepreneur.

S

search engine optimization (SEO): Google algorithms produce a system for pushing some Internet content to the top of any specific search.

search engine result placements (SERP): using SEO techniques to drive high placement during keyword searches.

sentiment: positive neutral or negative coding and analysis of content valence that may identify sarcasm or emotion through semantic study.

shaming: aggressive online communication targeted at forcing replay of social failures.

social business: application of business strategy, goals and tactics within social media marketing campaigns.

social graph: on Facebook, this is a user's complete social network.

social justice: equality and fairness of social, political economic and other action, such as found within the social media #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements calling for racial and gender equity, as well as *social responsibility* in the action of government and corporations.

social media dashboard: measurement tools that organize data for efficient analysis.

social network: an array of online platforms used to connect with others. Social network analysis (SNA) may be utilized to visualize links.

social network site (SNS): any online platform that enables communication between site accounts.

software: computer code that allows hardware to be used via an operating system, programs and applications.

sponsored content: paid media content that may appear near editorial media content and free social media content.

start-ups: new business ventures, sometimes with the funding help of “angel investors,” launch social media sites and apps. An innovation culture, annual events such as “South By Southwest” (#SXSW) and the tech journalism community drive interest and activity in the diffusion of new ideas and products.

storytelling: a fundamental concept in journalism and media communication. People have told stories since the development of language and oral tradition. Storytelling techniques, including the use of narrative, drive interest in content.

T

tactics: strategic PR campaigns devise a set of tactics used to achieve communication goals. For example, if a campaign is designed to raise awareness about an issue, a tactic may be to create a YouTube video that can be shared by bloggers.

tagging: on Facebook, a person can be tagged in a photograph. In doing so, a name is associated with a face and perhaps a place and these data can be shared across the social network. More generally, geotagging is use of a computer software code that identifies location. A smartphone photograph may be geotagged with the location and these data can be presented or used within the context of an application.

terms of service (ToS): contract law that users click and agree to use software, apps or websites.

third-party litigation funding (TPLF): legal or litigation finance provides money to cover a part of the cost to either bring a lawsuit or defend against one.

transparency: the social media approach of disclosing all relevant interests and not having a hidden agenda or manipulating facts to favor individual and organizational interests.

trending: on Twitter, different words and hashtags trend at any given time. These are the most talked-about items. These can be organic or “promoted” as advertising.

troll farms: purposively deceptive and disruptive social media communicators organized by bad actors using dozens of devices to simultaneously post.

trust: considered an important and fundamental characteristic for a lot of influential social media content. Trust is related to credibility and believability, which is frequently assessed by judging previous behavior, including communication.

Twitter analytics: a dashboard for social media managers to track real-time account data.

U

user-generated content (UGC): created content by users, often not sponsored by traditional professional media organizations.

user profile: online descriptions of user identities.

uses and gratifications theory: communication research study of active audience members and their need gratification.

utilitarianism: an emphasis on utility and happiness without regard for moral and ethical implication of behavior.

V

validity: in social science, the determination that measurement is conceptually what it was planned to be.

verification: verified account authenticity of identity is an important online concern. Twitter created a blue checkmark to identify those accounts that have been verified through its internal process and this also appears on some Facebook

pages. Additionally, Facebook users may take advantage of a two-step verification for login that includes a text message code to a mobile phone for account security.

viral: content that is shared quickly and widely because of high interest. Social media enables individuals to post viral videos on YouTube and rise to almost instant fame.

virtual communities: online spaces creating a community experience among users.

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